

LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF AN EX-LITERARY CRITIC

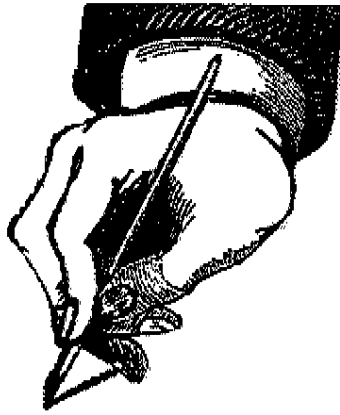


I ONCE MANAGED TO LIVE FOR A long time, and with no apparent stress, a secret life with literature. Publicly, in the books I'd written and in the classroom, I worked as an historian and polemicist of literary theory, who could speak with passion, and without noticeable impediment, about literature as a political instrument. I once wrote that the literary word was like a knife, a hammer, a gun. I became a known and somewhat colorfully controversial figure, regularly excoriated in neo-conservative laments about the academy.

The secret me was me-the-reader, in the act of reading: an experience in which the words of someone else filled me up and made it irrelevant to talk about my reading; an experience that I'd had for as long as I can remember being a reader. This secret life implicitly denied that any talk about what I had undergone could ever be authentic. My silent encounters with literature are ravishingly pleasurable, like erotic transport.

In private, I was tranquility personified; in public, an actor in the endless strife and divisiveness of argument, the

BY FRANK LENTRICCHIA



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"Dirty Harry of literary theory," as one reviewer put it. My secret life eventually was to be shared with students in my undergraduate classroom, while my public life as literary intellectual continued to be played out in the graduate classroom. Two types of classroom; two selves unhappy with one another.

ONCE, AND ONLY ONCE, I posed the following question to undergraduate majors in a course I teach at Duke University on modern literature: "Anybody here like literature?" Looks of puzzlement and concern: *Is he stoned?* I like my undergraduates, with whom I share a bond of stubborn naïveté. We believe that literature is pleasurable and important, as literature, and not as an illustration of something else. I've posed the same question in graduate seminars. The response never varies: knowing laughs, disturbing nods of recognition, a few stares of impatience and hostility. They assume I'm one of them. They say, "You don't believe that literature is important as literature." Then they point to the damaging evidence of some of my work in the field, usually to a book called *Criticism and Social Change*. I want to reply, "You need to understand the context." I say nothing. They believe that the book is clear, that no context can modify its essential meaning, and they're right. When *Criticism and Social Change* appeared in 1983, I was convinced that a literary critic, *as a literary critic*, could be an agent of social transformation, an activist who would show his students that, in its form and style, literature had a strategic role to play in the world's various arrangements of power; that literature wasn't to be relegated to the Arts and Leisure section of the Sunday paper, as if it were a thing for weekend amusement only. I would show my students that what is called "literature" is nothing but the most devious of rhetorical discourses (writing with political designs upon us all), either in opposition to or in complicity with the power in place. In either case, novels, poems, and plays deserved to be included in the Sunday section called News of the Week in Review.

Over the last ten years, I've pretty much stopped reading literary criticism, because most of it isn't literary. But criticism it is of a sort—the sort that stems from the sense that one is morally superior to the writers that one is supposedly describing. This posture of superiority is assumed when those writers represent the major islands of Western literary tradition, the central cultural engine—so it goes—of racism, poverty, sexism, homophobia, and imperialism: a cesspool that literary critics would expose for mankind's benefit. Just what it would avail us to learn that Flaubert was a sexist is not clear. It is impossible, this much is clear, to exaggerate the heroic self-inflation of academic literary criticism.

To be certified as an academic literary critic, you need to believe, and be willing to assert, that Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, a work twice the length of *Paradise Lost*, and which 99 percent of all serious students of literature find too difficult to read, actually forwards the cause of worldwide anti-Semitism. You need to tell your students that, despite what almost a century's worth of smart readers have concluded, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a subtle celebration of the desolations of imperialism. My objection is not that literary study has been politicized, but that it proceeds in happy indifference to, often in unconscionable innocence of, the protocols of literary competence. Only ten to fifteen years ago, the views I've cited on Pound and Conrad would have received barely passing grades had they been submitted as essays in an undergraduate course. Now, such views circulate at the highest levels of my profession in the essays of distinguished literary critics.

I've never believed that writers had to be superior in anything, except writing. The fundamental, if only implied, message of much literary criticism is self-righteous, and it takes this form: "T.S. Eliot is a homophobe and I am not. Therefore, I am a better person than Eliot. Imitate me, not Eliot." To which the proper response is: "But T.S. Eliot could really write, and you can't. Tell us truly, is there no filth in your soul?"

WHEN IT'S THE REAL THING, literature enlarges us; strips the film of familiarity from the world; creates bonds of sympathy with all kinds, even with evil characters, who we learn are all in the family. Each of these points has been made long ago in response to the question, What is literature for? With no regrets, I tell you that I have nothing new to offer to the field of literary theory.

I confess to never having been able to get enough of the real thing. I worry incessantly about using up my stash and spending the last years of my life in gloom, having long ago mainlined all the great, veil-piercing books. Great *because* veil-piercing. Books propelling me out of the narrow life that I lead in my own little world, offering me revelations of strangers, who turn out not to be totally strange; a variety of real worlds, unveiled for me, for the first time.

If you should happen to enjoy the literary experience of liberation, it's not likely that you do so because you're able to take apart the formal resources of literature. All that you know is that you live where you live and that you are who you are. Then you submit to the text, you relinquish yourself, because you need to be transported. You know with complete certitude that, when you are yourself, you are only, at best, half alive. Even if you can't say what it is, you know when you're in the thrall of real literature. You can't get your fix from reading the Op-Ed page or, for that matter, any other pages in discourses you think of as *not literary*. If asked to define "literary," you could not do it. If pressed, you'd say, "I'm not interested in the question." It's like asking me who God is. You might say, as I would, "The question 'What is literature?' is a question for those who secretly hate literature." If you put a gun to my head, I'll say, "All literature is travel literature, all true readers shut-ins."

The first time that I traveled it was 1956 and I was sixteen. I was in bed. Ever since, I like to do it in a bed, or reclining on a couch, or on the floor, with my knees drawn up—just like the first time, the book leaning against my thighs, nestled in my groin. The first booking was arranged by a high school teacher named (honest) LaBella, who

said to me out of the blue, "Live fast, die young, and have a good-looking corpse." He told me that he was quoting a line from a novel that I should read, *Knock on Any Door* by Willard Motley. I tried to take out the book from my hometown public library but was informed that I could have it only if I brought them a letter from my mother saying that it was okay, which my indulgent mother was happy to write.

After supper, I withdrew to my room, shut the door, and read deep into the night. Next morning, I didn't bother with breakfast. My mother looked in to ask if I was sick. I kept on going into the early afternoon, when I finished, still in my pajamas, unwashed and unshaven. Too bad I couldn't have hooked up a catheter.

I was living in the world of Nick Romano, a good Italian-American Catholic, an altar boy, who through a terrible unfairness is cast down into the mean streets of Chicago's West Side and, eventually, at twenty-one, into the electric chair for a murder that he in fact committed and that I wanted him to get away with. Live fast, die young, and have a good-looking corpse was Nick's motto. He loved a girl named Rosemary, who loved him back passionately. They actually did it.

I was also a good Italian-American Catholic, crazy for a girl named Rosemary, but whom I never talked to, never mind the other thing, which almost nobody in my teen world did. I lived in Utica, New York, a small ethnic town, where parents were strict, where the streets were not mean. I had (and have) a dramatic life in books, not on the streets.

A couple of years ago, I learned that the late Willard Motley was gay and black, and that he only rarely wrote about blacks. Occasionally I try to factor Motley's race and sexual orientation into what I experienced when I read his novel. I can't do it. Recently, I learned that Motley said, in response to an obvious question, that he considered himself to be a member of the human race. In the current academy, there's no possibility of accepting that statement as anything but a pathetic dodge.

When I grew up and became a literary critic, I learned to keep silent

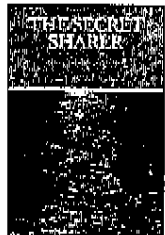


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about the reading experiences of liberation that I'd enjoyed since childhood. With many of my generation, I believed that my ability to say the words "politics" and "literature" in the same breath was the only socially responsible way to affirm the value of literary study.

Then, seven years ago, I lost my professional bearing and composure. The actual crisis occurred in a graduate class, just as I was about to begin a lecture on Faulkner. Before I could get a word out, a student said, "The first thing we have to understand is that Faulkner is a racist." I responded with a stare, but he was not intimidated. I was. He wanted to subvert me with what I thought crude versions of ideas that had made my academic reputation, and that had (as he told me before the semester began) drawn him to my class. And now I was refusing to be the critic he had every right to think I was. And I felt subverted. Later in the course, another student attacked Don DeLillo's *White Noise* for what he called its insensitivity to the Third World. I said, "But the novel doesn't concern the Third World. It's set in a small town in Middle America. It concerns the technological catastrophes of the First World." The student replied, "That's the problem. It's ethnocentric and elitist." I had been, before that class, working hard to be generous. After that class, I didn't want to be generous anymore and tried to communicate how unspeakably stupid I found these views, but had trouble staying fully rational. There was an explosion or two of operatic dimension. I wasn't the tenor hero; I was the baritone villain.

So I gave up teaching graduate students. I escaped into the undergraduate classroom—in other words, slipped happily underground in order to talk to people who, like me, need to read great literature just as much as they need to eat.

I'M A TEACHER WHO

believes that literature can't be taught, if by teaching we mean being in lucid possession of a discipline, a method, and rules for the engagement of the object of study. I believe that the finest

examples of the object of study cannot be ruled and that, therefore, professional literary study is a contradiction in terms. Great writing is a literally *unruly*, one-of-a-kind thing, something new and original in the world of literature, which (like all cultural worlds) is dominated by the conventional and the rule-driven: the boringly second-rate. Where then is the teacher? In my classroom, I assume, but cannot prove, that there can be illuminating conversation about the peaks of unruly originality, from Homer and Dante to Joyce and Proust. I assume that such conversation cannot be replaced by what goes on in the sociology or the economics classroom.

We do not, after all, tell economists that all economic data and systems are actually disguised examples of novels, poems, and plays. Yet this is precisely the form of absurdity that the professional study of literature has taken. The situation in the literary wing of the academy is that those who (when teenagers) spent the days and nights of their lives with their noses happily buried in imaginative literature now believe that they must look elsewhere, to academic disciplines, for the understanding and values of their happiness. And look elsewhere they do, with holy zeal. They embark upon a course and leave their happiness far behind.

I believe that what is now called literary criticism is a form of Xeroxing. Tell me your theory and I'll tell you in advance what you'll say about any work of literature, especially those you haven't read. Texts are not read; they are pre-read. All of literature is x and nothing but x , and literary study is the naming (exposure) of x . For x , read imperialism, sexism, homophobia, and so on. All of literary history is said to be a display of x , because human history is nothing but the structure of x . By naming x , we supposedly name the social order (ordure) as it is, and always has been. The point of naming it? Presumably to produce a contagion of true understanding (the critic as social interventionist), from which would follow appropriate social change in wholesome directions, though it has to be noted that the literary academy has long been staffed by people with righteous understanding, who assiduously

disseminate that understanding in the classroom, and still the world remains governed by sexism and so on. In the hearts of those who study literature lies the repressed but unshakable conviction that the study of literature serves no socially valued purpose. Too bad academic literary critics can't accept their amateur status—that is, their status as lovers.

If the authority of a contemporary literary critic lies in his *theory of x*, then wherein lies the authority of the theory itself? In disciplines in which he has little experience and less training. The typical literary critic who wields a theory is not himself a sociologist, historian, or economist, as well as a student of literature. A scandal of professional impersonation? No, because the impersonators speak only into the mirror of other impersonators and rarely to those in a position to test their theories for fraudulence. An advanced literature department is the place where you can write a dissertation on Wittgenstein and never have to face an examiner from the philosophy department. An advanced literature department is the place where you may speak endlessly about gender and never have to face the scrutiny of a biologist, because gender is just a social construction, and nature doesn't exist.

My reader has the right to pose some questions: You say that literature of original character can't be taught. So what is it that you do in your classroom? And you are obviously weary of the pounding chatter about sexism and so on. Are you saying that those subjects of academic literary criticism are not important just because they are fashionable? Is not literature significantly about such subjects, whether or not literary critics take them up? My answers: Literature is about homophobia and so on, but only because literature is about everything real and imaginable under the sun, including man as a political animal. Imperialism and so on are subjects for imagination, not agendas or ideas to be illustrated. Imaginative writers have but one agenda: to write beautifully, rivetingly, unforgettably.

What I see in the academy is an eager flight from literature by those who refuse to take the *literary* measure

of the subject, whatever the subject may be. The literature student sees the objects that historians and sociologists see, but he ought to see them through the special lens of literature as objects in stylized and imaginative landscapes. The authentic literary type believes with Oscar Wilde that life is an imitation of art. Sociologists don't believe that; philosophers don't either. Why should they? They're sociologists and philosophers, who know that life is an imitation of sociology and philosophy.

I would take it as a sign of renewed health in literary studies if critics would recognize the value and authority of other disciplines, in which they have (for the most part) but cocktail party acquaintance, disciplines practiced by serious people, many of whom do not take literature seriously, but perhaps more seriously than they take literary critics, whom they think of as charlatans deluxe. I would take it as a miraculous sign of full recovery if contemporary literary critics would recognize the impious comedic dimension of the most serious and weighty works of the literary tradition.

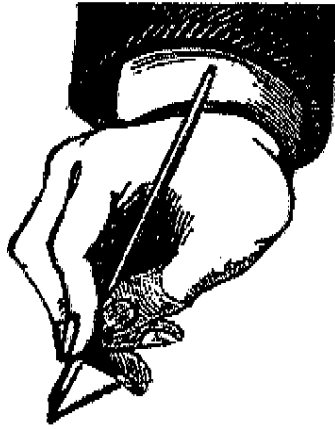
THE FIRST THING I DO

in my classroom is shut the door and then make sure it's shut tight. (Unfortunately, on the windows of my classroom there are no shades.) Since I do not believe that, as a literary critic, I can have honest recourse to method, theory, and discipline—original writing being, by my definition, the antithesis of those things—I'm uneasy about what I do on university grounds, where those in charge have every right to expect that professors convey knowledge in systematic fashion, so that students might come away with an "education"—rules of investigation that they might apply to texts that I haven't taught them. The academy doth make scientific impersonators of literary critics, who should rather be anarchists.

Behind closed doors, with only undergraduates in attendance, I become something of a rhapsode. As Plato says in the *Ion*, rhapsodes are enthusiasts. We're out of our minds. Like all rhapsodes, I like to recite from the text. I tell my students that in true recitation, we're possessed, we are the



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medium for the writer's voice. I speak the text as the writer would speak it—this is my radical and unverifiable claim—and the phrases and sentences flow out of me as they flowed from him in the process of creating the text. The writer flows into me and out of me: my mouth his exit into our world.

My listener-students, in the moment of recitation, are infused, taken over by the writer's original voice embodied in me. They too become possessed. Rhapsode and audience assume a single strange consciousness, not their own: "living," not "knowing," the text. We are simply, and collectively, mad.

Because I am an imperfect rhapsode, I bring to my students what I know about literary history, the author's life and times, literary forms, types, and styles: real knowledge, slowly and sometimes painfully gained over a lifetime, which takes me to the brink of the text itself. My doctorate in literature helps, but it does not take me inside. I share this knowledge with my students, but it doesn't substitute for an honest act of reading. Then we face, let us say, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and

quickly learn that, when we confront the page itself, calling *Ulysses* a novel, or a comic epic in prose, or an odd instance of satire, or a modernist experiment, doesn't do us much good, even if we have a sophisticated understanding of what these things mean. At the level of the page itself, all I have is my relatively informed sensibility and a number of years of reading, as I fumble in the dark of originality. We try to describe what is on the page. That's all.

In my classes we creep along (a whole semester, for example, on *Ulysses*). We tend to have difficulty getting through reading lists. I am a slow reader. We tend not to come to large conclusions. We don't know, at the end of the semester, what *Ulysses* means. We even have a hard time with the question, What is *Ulysses* about? A harder time, I'm pleased to say, at the end of the semester than at the beginning. I'm not comfortable with questions about meaning or subject matter. I am a man flying from ideas, including his own.

Most of all, we get lost in the particulars of Joyce's writing. We like to wallow. We try to see "characters,"

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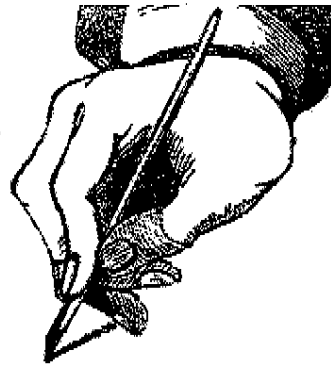
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"Dublin," "narrative," but what we only see is writing. Again and again we make the reader's equivalent of the discovery that Marcel Proust made when he finally knew that he was a writer. The young Proust was burdened with a sense that a mystery lay concealed behind certain objects of the world which he could not get out of his mind. His sense of concealed significance coincided with his despair of finding a literary vocation. Then one fine day the rind of things peeled away and he saw that the mysterious significance was a phrase, perhaps a word, maybe a fragment of a sentence. And these were *his* words, first fruits of his wanting to write. Proust found his own writing as the secret concealed behind things. So the reader of Joyce, or of any writer of force, looking for the big things behind the text, will in the end find the only big thing, the writing in its specific shape and texture, and all that the writing incarnates, thanks to its specific shape and texture. The reader stays happily, then, at the surface of the text, where all the deep stuff resides, trying to describe the surface—feeling about it in the dark, then reporting back from the

dark in words that would describe the encounter with strange combinations of words.

My classes are an attempt to share a text in this way. The text so shared is memorable, we remember it long, because we hover over the surface untiringly; low-flying readers we are. We would memorize *Ulysses*. Teacher and students textually bonded for about fifteen weeks; becoming something cohesive and intimate, an enworded community. Later, when we must part our ways (they graduate and go away for good, only a few return), we will occasionally (in our privacy) see our lives through the world-bearing words of *Ulysses*, and we'll recall each other and ourselves in that classroom, and we'll be united again in a way, in Joyce's writing, as we travel again together in a world made by Joyce. I think that's a good enough reason to teach literature, in any classroom.

Frank Lentricchia teaches literature at Duke University. His novels, *Johnny Critelli* and *The Knifemen*, will be published together in one volume by Scribner's in November.



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