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What We Have Loved

I choose as my text Wordsworth's vow at the end of *The Prelude*:

What we have loved,
Others will love, and we will teach them how.¹

I would wish for all of us, scholars, a steady memory of the time when we were not yet scholars—before we knew what research libraries or variorum editions were, before we had heard any critical terms, before we had seen a text with footnotes. It was in those innocent days that our attachment to literature arose—from reading a novel or a poem or from seeing a play. In every true reading of literature in adult life we revert to that early attitude of entire receptivity and plasticity and innocence before the text. I once heard Northrop Frye maintain this view in a lecture; it is only later, he said, after the immersion in reading, that we turn to debate, query, or commentary. His listeners at that time disputed his remark, arguing that they were scholars and could not forget, as they reread *Hamlet*, its textual and critical problems. The discussion ended in a stale-

1. This essay was delivered at Houston, Texas, as the 1980 MLA Presidential Address.



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mate, with neither side conceding. To my mind, if I understood him correctly, Frye was right. Though the state of reading, like that of listening to a piece of music, is one of intense attention, it is not one of scholarly or critical reflection. It is a state in which the text works on us, not we on it. In that state, scholarship, criticism, and theory are suspended, though, paradoxically, everything we know and are is unreflexively brought to bear; and the hesitations, pleasures, and perplexities we encounter and absorb in that state are the material, as we bring them to consciousness, for all subsequent intellectual reflection. It is this state of intense engagement and self-forgetfulness that we hope our students will come to know. From that state, at least ideally, there issue equally the freshman essay, the senior thesis, the scholarly paper on prosody, the interdisciplinary paper on social thought and literature, the pedagogical paper on compositional structure, the variorum edition, and the theoretical argument. **No matter how elementary or how specialized the written inquiry, it originated in problems raised by human submission to, and interrogation of, a text.**

We all know well, and therefore feel no need to explain, the connection between our first reading and writing as students and our scholarly reading and writing now. But the public in general, and even some of our administrators, know us less well than we know ourselves. They do not understand what we do as scholars and critics; nor do they understand how that advanced study differs from what we do in the classroom. They assume that what we write in journals for an audience of peers is what we say to young students in our courses; and consequently they suspect (in the way they would not in the case of a neurologist or a particle physicist speaking to peers) that we are engaged in "overspecialization." They would, like the people in Marianne Moore's gibe, prefer us to write "in plain American that cats and dogs can read." In explaining ourselves—and our more difficult writers, too—to such critics, we must think back not only to our own first principles but also to our own experience as timid readers and students before we became professionals. But it is not the words we address to one another that will reach the general public and give them a truer idea of us; nor will critical books reach them. We have one chief way

of reaching that public, and that is in our classrooms. The idea of us that they glean from their first classroom experience is often an unhappy one: and that is why I have taken up here the question of how best to teach others how to love what we have loved. Since most people do not love what we love, and will not in their lifetimes love it, we are easily discouraged. As teachers of English and foreign languages, we first meet our pupils in freshman English or in freshman language classes—and these students are often there involuntarily. We complain that the musicologist does not have to teach every freshman to compose music; the art historian does not have to teach everyone to paint; but the English teacher is expected to teach everyone to write. We meet our students in the least winning way, calling on them to practice an art or a language they are no more trained in than they are in composing quartets or painting in oils. It by no means follows, as we know, that to be able to speak one's native language means that one can write it; one can sing songs without being able to score a note. Our students necessarily experience uncertainty, and even shame, as we ask them, in elementary English and language classes, to confront and overcome their inhibitions of expression in their own or a foreign language. In the best possible result, we liberate them into a satisfying written speech. But it is not easy for all beginning students to find happiness in what Dickinson called "This consent of Language / This loved Philology."

The concern we all feel for our students' difficulty in writing leads to different theories of how best to lead them to a true ease in writing, and we are, within ourselves, divided on this subject. We have forgotten, I think, how unnatural writing is; most people, historically, have had little need for writing in life and have got along, after their few years of schooling ended, with speech as their medium of social exchange. Writers—easy and natural writers—have always been, first of all, readers. Just as spoken language is absorbed by the ear, so written language has to be learned from the pages of writers—from writers who wrote for the love of the art. Our composition classes, on the whole, neglect this elementary truth. But there is another reason, as well, for having our composition students read "art writings" rather than journalism or "model essays" or—de-

plorably—examples of student writing. That second reason has to do with what the American public are to think of us.

The adolescent young are much more likely to find the solace, insight, and truth they have a right to expect from us as “humanists” in poems, plays, stories, fables, and tales than they are to find these gifts in the exercises and models of elementary classes in composition and language. The divorce of composition from the reading of powerful imaginative writing is our greatest barrier to creating an American public who understand what we love. They think we love the correct use of “lie” and “lay” or the agreement between subject and predicate—and so we do; but those are not our only loves, or even our first loves. We love uneducated poets like Whitman; we love poets who cannot spell, like Keats and Yeats. If we are given half the youth of America for a term or a year, for thirty or sixty hours of freshman English, can we not give them *The Book of Ruth* or *The Song of Myself* or Chekhov as well as warnings about dangling participles? If writing is to reading as speaking is to listening, can we not hope to advance on the front of composition by providing reading’s indispensable literary education of the untrained ear and eye as well as writing’s training of the uncertain hand? Can we not, in foreign languages, include, even at the earliest levels, some simple genuine literature, myths or parables, so that the hungry sheep are not fed only pattern drills? There are classes in which these admirable things are done; we need to diffuse their example, if we are to correct the prevalent impression of us as inhibiting pedants with an obsessive relation to “correctness”—whether correctness of usage or correctness of pronunciation.

Wordsworth, early in *The Prelude*, speaks of youth as a time “When every hour brings palpable access / Of knowledge, when all knowledge is delight” (II, 286–87). If our students, in their first acquaintance with departments of English and foreign languages, experience too little of that delight at the access of knowledge, it is because the best delights we have to offer—those of literature—have somehow not been included in our first courses for students—courses that are often our last chance to reach them. If we could awaken in our beginning students, in their first year, the response that they can all feel to the

human story told in compelling ways, we would begin to form a general public who approve of what we are and what we do. After all, in their first course in music they hear wonderful scores; in their first course in art they see wonderful paintings—and their minds should receive equal stimulus from us. That is the first step in teaching people how to love what we have loved.

But, as scholars, we also teach at a more complicated level; we love, beyond philology and composition and literature, the work of scholarship, by which we mean accurate evidence on literary matters. We are engaged in teaching others—our more advanced students—how to love what we love in the discipline of scholarship: how to prize the exact edition over the inadequate one; how to estimate the dispassionate presentation of fact over tendentious argument; how to value concision and clarity over obscurity and evasiveness; how to appreciate a new critical vocabulary when it brings new energy or insight into our world. It was as graduate students that we ourselves first reached, in ignorance, for editions and commentaries, trying to understand Marvell or Hölderlin; we all recall adopting certain critics or scholars as especially congenial models, whom we could admire and imitate if not ever equal. We must make it clearer, to those both within and outside university life who do not understand what we do, how strong is the chain of transmission of scholarship, by insubordination as well as filiation, from one generation to the next. Love is shown, as Harold Bloom has made us recognize, as much by revolutionary reaction and reappropriation as by gratitude and imitation. The attentiveness of scholarship to the most minute aspects, as well as to the grander ones, of literature is an instance, to quote Wordsworth once more, of the “most watchful power of love,” which leaves “a register / Of permanent relations, else unknown” (*The Prelude* II, 291–93).

If we succeed at all in teaching others, from freshmen to graduate students, to love what we have loved, we hope that some of them will become the teachers who will replace us—and that they will teach out of love, and write out of love, when they do write. It is now more often than not administrators, seeking to make even smaller the eye of the needle through

which the young must pass for tenure, who begin to make quantitative demands for publication, invoking a standard defensible perhaps in research institutions but corrupting and fraudulent when applied universally. We allow surgeons to operate and not write; we allow lawyers to plead cases and not write; cannot we allow teachers in colleges to teach and not write? There is no need to expect all teachers to be writers. Writing is a different profession from teaching, a different profession even from scholarly research and discovery, a different profession from the profession of critical thinking. Writing demands different impulses, different talents, a different temperament. Writing not done out of love will never serve to teach others how to love what we have loved.

We must, I think, come to some consensus about what we do love and what we wish to teach others to love. One of the forms our recent discouragement has taken is our despair over the curriculum: if students will not enroll for a course in Spanish drama of the Golden Age or for a course in Milton, how, we wonder, are we to teach them what we love? The answer will be different on each campus; but the answer is certainly not the abandoning of all pre-twentieth-century authors. With the partial dissolution of the historically organized curriculum, many departments of English have resigned themselves to offering courses in film, science fiction, and contemporary American writing. But more imaginative departments have invented courses, centered on themes or styles, that include a range of authors from Chaucer to Faulkner. And departments of English and foreign languages alike can press for, and participate in, core courses that will restore to our students, so unjustly deprived of a knowledge of cultural riches, a sense of how many great authors there are to know.

It remains, after all, mysteriously true that students can develop enthusiasm even for arcane materials mediated by a teacher of sufficient talent. The best guarantee of having Milton taught is having a gifted teacher of Milton in the department. If the authors we love are not being taught, it is not our students' fault: it is our own. The angels, as a poet remarked, keep their ancient places; the greatest authors keep their ancient sustaining powers, too; our students will love those authors if we can find

ways to bring students and authors together, even if under different rubrics from those historical or generic ones on which we ourselves were reared.

We love, we must recall, two things centrally: one is literature, but the other, equally powerful, is language. In our eagerness to convey all of literature to our students, we create courses offering works in translation: it would not do, we say, for our students to be ignorant of Homer because they have not learned Greek or for them to miss Dostoevsky because they have no Russian; we would be sorry not to have them read the *Odyssey* or *The Idiot*. There is a conspiracy, a benevolent one, to pretend that after a course given in translation, we know the *Odyssey* or *The Idiot*. We do, in part, but not wholly; and I think we must make much clearer to ourselves and to our students what it is we do know, and what we do not know, from such reading in translation. We will then know better what we are teaching in the opposite situation, when we are teaching works in the language in which they were written. If we teach Dickens in English in the same terms in which we teach Dostoevsky in translation—as a large matter of themes and social concerns and governing imagery—then we are not doing justice to what we love in our native language. We might just as well be teaching an Italian translation of Dickens. Our students need to love not just Shakespeare's characters but Shakespeare's language, not just Keats's sentiments but Keats's English—that English which he thought should be kept up. And they need to love not just Dante's visionary structures but his sumptuously varied Italian. We have given too little thought to the teaching of the language of literature; it is a separate language, with its own rules. The American pragmatic and moral tradition of literary pedagogy tends to make the literature class a class dealing (often sentimentally) with ethics or sociology or history or religion rather than a class investigating an incomparable and idiosyncratic voice, which speaks a language so distinctively its own that we can identify it, after a sentence or two, as the language of Keats or Dante. If the recent emphasis on the intertextuality of literature—that commerce which poems have with each other—helps to redress the wrongs literature has suffered at the hands of eager or sentimental moralists, it will not come amiss; and

it will make more precise what it is that we love in literature. It is perhaps true that we all love different things in literature, or love literature for different reasons. Some love the literature of a specific topic—literature about God, or literature about history. Some love the literature of a particular age, and they become specialists in a given period. Some love the writing of a single author, and they become our Proustians or our Shakespearians. Some love the literature of puzzle, some the literature of philosophical argument, some the literature of rhetoric, some the literature of social reform. Because of our inevitable biases of training and predilection, reformations and counterreformations spring up among us. Fashions in literary discourse are themselves harmless and entertaining—and even necessary, lest one good custom should corrupt the world; it seems idle to hope for a single orthodoxy. It is certainly more instructive to our students to find teachers coming at literature from many vantage points than to be subjected to a single vision; and the most useful critical truth a student can learn is that a piece of literature yields different insights depending on the questions put to it. The best argument for a critical position is the serenity with which it is practiced, not the defensiveness that it exhibits. If we remember our common love of our texts, we can afford to be hospitable to critical difference and serene in our own affinities.

Finally, we must give some thought, if we are to preserve what we love, to our present and our future. In recent years we have been urged—by the Rockefeller Commission on the Future of the Humanities, for example—to make common cause with the other disciplines grouped loosely together under the label “the humanities”—philosophy, religion, history, musicology, art history, the classics. There is no reason why we should not find strength in union, especially for the purpose of lobbying, since administrations and foundations understand strength better than delicacy. But in such necessary joint undertakings, we are more bound than ever to recall our own separateness from other disciplines. National literatures, and the languages that are their bases, do not translate easily into supranational or interdisciplinary realms. Each language is stubbornly itself, and it never entirely yields up its being except to native speakers; literature is a dense nest of cultural and lin-

guistic meanings inaccessible to the casual passerby. Even more, each of our great authors is unique: what is true of Austen is not true of Lawrence; what is true of Ronsard is not true of Racine. A general interdisciplinary Poloniuslike religious-historical-philosophical-cultural overview will never reproduce that taste on the tongue—as distinctive as alum, said Hopkins—of an individual style. And though we are urged, by an authority as congenial as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, to see art (as he has seen the art of Bali) as one cultural manifestation among many, intimately linked to the way a culture manifests itself in government and in the private order, we must reply that we prize not something we call “Renaissance literature” but *King Lear*, not “the Victorian temper” but *In Memoriam*, not modernism but *Ulysses*; and what we prize in them is precisely what does *not* exist elsewhere in the culture of which they form a part, their own idiosyncrasy. We love in *King Lear* precisely what distinguishes it from *Hamlet* or *Doctor Faustus*, the quality that makes it not simply a Renaissance tragedy, not simply a Shakespearean play, but the single and unrepeatable combination of elements we call *King Lear*. It is from the experience of one or two such works that we were all led to the place where we now are, and it is from that original vision—of the single, unduplicatable, compelling literary object—that we must always take our final strength in university life and public life alike, whatever combinatorial tactics prudence may occasionally recommend.

If the present state of what we love is precarious, and its future uncertain, we can take some comfort in Yeats’s cold and true words:

But is there any comfort to be found?
Man is in love and loves what vanishes,
What more is there to say?²

Whole civilizations, as Yeats reminds us, have been put to the sword. Living languages have become dead languages; some

2. William Butler Yeats, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” ll. 41–43, from W. B. Yeats, *The Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Macmillan, 1983), p. 208.

languages have vanished before they could be recorded. Whole literary genres have disappeared. Literature has passed from being oral to being written. Beautiful forms of writing, like the hieroglyphics, have gone from the face of the earth. For all our efforts in the classroom and in public life to convey what we love, we may be in fact witnessing, as some have argued, a change in our culture from the culture of the letter to the culture of the image. In that case, reading will persist, like listening to chamber music, as the refuge of a comparative few. Though we can scarcely envisage a time when the best-loved texts of our various mother tongues will have become obsolete, we have only to think of the concerns of the medieval university to realize how completely its curriculum has disappeared. Ours may be no more permanent.

What we can be certain of is the persistence of art, and of literary art, in some form, since in every culture, as Wordsworth said, the mind of man becomes by its aesthetic inventions, "A thousand times more beautiful than the earth / On which he dwells." For Wordsworth, as he closed *The Prelude*, this was the highest possible compliment to the mind, that it should be, by its aesthetic capacity, more beautiful than this frame of things, the earth. The mind of man is "above this frame of things . . . / In beauty exalted"; and that beauty of the mind was, to Wordsworth as to us, chiefly visible in that "transparent veil" of words which, in literature, both embodied and transformed the things of this world. Besides the great Nature of the physical world, there is, says Wordsworth, a "great Nature that exists in works / Of mighty Poets." It is that great poetic Nature which we are charged to transmit to our students and to the larger public, who need to understand both what we do and what literature does. Literature shows us the world again so that we recognize it, says Wordsworth; at the same time, literature pours a transforming light on the world, investing it—by bestowing on it insight, shape, and concentration—with a glory not its own:

Visionary power
Attends the motions of the viewless winds,
Embodied in the mystery of words;
There, darkness makes abode, and all the host

Of shadowy things work endless changes there,
As in a mansion like their proper home.
Even forms and substances are circumfused
By that transparent veil with light divine,
And, through the turnings intricate of verse,
Present themselves as objects recognized,
In flashes, and with glory not their own.

(*The Prelude* v, 595–605)

Wordsworth's vocabulary of a divine veil of verse, clothing with an unfamiliar glory the objects of the earth, is perhaps not the vocabulary we might now use. One of our own modern poets thought it truer to say of his *Collected Poems* that they were like the geography teacher's terrestrial globe—an exact representation, point for point, of the planet, only smaller. He called the book containing his poems "The Planet on the Table" and said that he was glad he had written his poems:

They were of a remembered time,
Or of something seen that he liked.

It was not important that they survive.
What mattered was that they should bear
Some lineament or character.

Some affluence, if only half-perceived,
In the poverty of their words,
Of the planet of which they were part.³

Wordsworth thought words conferred divine light; Stevens apologizes for their poverty in reproducing the riches of sensation and memory. We recognize the truth of both assertions and alternately dwell on one or the other. When we emphasize the creating light in the mystery of words, we ponder the power of language itself in its aesthetic use; when we feel the poverty of language we emphasize the affluence of the planet—its sights, societies, institutions, concepts, and events—reflected in literature—our best mirror, if a limited one. We advance on two fronts, one chiefly aesthetic, the other chiefly mimetic; each,

3. Wallace Stevens, "The Planet on the Table," ll. 2–3 and 10–15, from *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968) p. 532.

under hostile glances, can appear unworthy, but we know that both are necessary and that we love in literature both its mimetic powers and its inward-turning self-possession.

We also advance on the two fronts of the extensive and the intensive: there is a place, in teaching others to love what we love, for the rapid survey as well as for the course on one author. Our students come to us from secondary school having read no works of literature in foreign languages and scarcely any works of literature in their own language. The very years, between twelve and eighteen, when they might be reading rapidly, uncritically, rangingly, happily, thoughtlessly, are somehow dissipated without cumulative force. Those who end their education with secondary school have been cheated altogether of their literary inheritance, from the Bible to Robert Lowell. It is no wonder that they do not love what we love; we as a culture have not taught them to. With a reformed curriculum beginning in preschool, all children would know about the Prodigal Son and the Minotaur; they would know the stories presumed by our literature, as children reading Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* or Hawthorne's *Tanglewood Tales* once knew them. We can surely tell them the tales before they can read Shakespeare or Ovid; there are literary forms appropriate to every age, even the youngest. Nothing is more lonely than to go through life unaccompanied by a sense that others have also gone through it, and have left a record of their experience. Every adult needs to be able to think of Job, or Orpheus, or Circe, or Ruth, or Lear, or Jesus, or the Golden Calf, or the Holy Grail, or Antigone in order to refer private experience to some identifying frame or solacing reflection.

I do not mean, by emphasizing the great tales of our inherited culture, to minimize the local and the ethnic. Literary imagination is incurably local. But it is against the indispensable background of the general literary culture that native authors assert their local imaginations. Our schools cannot afford to neglect either resource. Nor do I mean, by dwelling on the narrative content of literature, to ignore the difference between a retelling like Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* and Shakespeare himself. If we give our children the tales, in abridged or adapted form, it is because we hope they will then come to the real

thing—the *Nibelungenlied* or the Gospels or Homer—with some sense of intimacy and delighted recognition, rather than with a sense of the unfamiliar and the daunting. And if they know the story in one form, a simple one, and meet it later in another, more complicated form, they are bound to be curious about the differences of linguistic embodiment, and there literary interest, and literary appreciation, can begin.

It is not within our power as scholars to reform the primary and secondary schools, even if we have a sense of how that reform might begin. We do have it within our power, I believe, to reform ourselves, to make it our own first task to give, especially to our beginning students, that rich web of associations, lodged in the tales of majority and minority culture alike, by which they could begin to understand themselves as individuals and as social beings. We must give them some examples of literature, suited to their level of reading, in which these tales have an indisputably literary embodiment. All freshman English courses, to my mind, should devote at least half their time to the reading of myth, legend, and parable; and beginning language courses should do the same. We owe it to ourselves to teach what we love in our first, decisive encounter with our students and to insist that the freedom to write is based on a freedom of reading. Otherwise we misrepresent ourselves, and we deprive our students. Too often, they go away, disheartened by our implicit or explicit criticism of their speech and writing in English or in a foreign language; and we go away disheartened by our conviction that we have not in that first year engaged their hearts or their minds; and both parties never see each other again. And the public, instead of remembering how often, in later life, they have thought of the parable of the talents, or the loss of Eurydice, or the sacrifice of Isaac, or the patience of Penelope, or the fox and the grapes, or the minister's black veil, remember the humiliations of freshman English or long-lost drills in language laboratories. We owe it to ourselves to show our students, when they first meet us, what we are; we owe their dormant appetites, thwarted for so long in their previous schooling, that deep sustenance that will make them realize that they too, having been taught, love what we love.

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