

What Ought Humanists To Do?

J. Hillis Miller

I am honored to contribute to this issue of *Dædalus*, “What Humanists Do.”¹ Each contributor was asked by guest editor Denis Donoghue to identify a text that has meant much to her or him, then discuss it. This assignment presupposes that humanists spend much of their time interpreting texts and promoting their circulation among their students, readers of their scholarship, and the general public. It is as though we contributors were asked, “Come on now, account for your activities as humanists. Tell us what you do. Tell us why what humanists do contributes to the public good!” I promise further on to give such an accounting for my own work. First, however, I need to make a few preliminary remarks.

1) Such an issue of *Dædalus* would not be needed if the social utility of what humanists do were not the subject of widespread doubt. That utility used to be taken for granted. It is hardly necessary to rehearse the evidence for this doubt. A high-level administrator at Harvard is reported to have said a few years ago, “The humanities are a lost cause.” Humanities departments around the country are being either abolished or amalgamated, for example into a single department of “Literature and Cultural Studies,” or into a single department of “Foreign Languages.” President Obama, in his eloquent speeches about the need for increased support for education in the United States, always speaks about science and math, never once, to my knowledge, about the need for more and better humanities teaching.

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At the same time, literary studies (my field) paradoxically remain extremely active. The large number of dissertations, books, essays, new journals, and conferences worldwide in the field is evidence of that. A newly advertised university position in literary studies typically has hundreds of highly qualified applicants. Most of these, alas, will remain unemployed, or employed as adjuncts typically teaching three or four composition courses a semester, often at several different colleges, for a poverty wage and often no benefits.

2) A somewhat different answer would need to be given if instead of asking, “What do humanists do?” we humanists were asked, “What did humanists use to do?” or “What should humanists do now?” The latter question is perhaps the most challenging. I have therefore called my essay “What Ought Humanists To Do?”

3) It would be seriously misleading to suggest that a literary scholar spends most of her or his time reading good poems, novels, and plays and then teaching them and writing about them. Relatively little of a literary scholar’s time is spent doing the sort of work I think Denis Donoghue has in mind when he asks, “What do humanists do?” From graduate school until achieving status as a senior professor, literary scholars, like those in most academic fields, spend a great deal of time these days sending and answering email messages; serving on time-consuming departmental and university- or college-wide committees; writing seemingly innumerable letters of recommendation; serving as a departmental or program administrator; participating in reading groups; preparing and giving a multitude of conference papers at home, in the United States, and around the world; hearing and responding to papers given by colleagues or campus visitors; applying for fellowships and postdocs; planning new programs and curricula; evaluating students’ and colleagues’ papers

and book manuscripts; meeting students and colleagues during office hours and in the halls; responding to requests for submissions of essays for special issues of the proliferating multitude of journals around the world, many of which are now online journals; reading the geometrically increasing number of books and essays in one’s fields; not to speak of trying, always unsuccessfully, to keep up with the innumerable (and to a considerable degree incompatible) books on theory; writing commissioned essays like this one that try to justify literary studies as an important part of the humanities divisions in colleges and universities; answering requests to be interviewed, sometimes for podcasts; and yes, looking something up on Wikipedia, blogging or using Twitter or Facebook (the latter two I do not yet do), watching films or television shows, playing video games, listening to any one of the innumerable forms and subforms of popular music by way of CDs or iTunes, surfing the Web, and using iPhones or iPads – in short, doing everything but what many people assume is the main justification of a literary scholar’s existence: reading, interpreting, teaching, and writing about primary literary texts. I forbear even to mention family responsibilities.

No book in literary studies was ever completed and published except in the face of multitudinous professional and personal demands that conspire to keep literary scholars from doing what is, or what it seems ought to be, their primary vocation. Most such work is done in the brief moments snatched from other duties. For a number of years, especially while I was a department chair, I used to get up at five (modeling myself somewhat laughably on Anthony Trollope and Paul Valéry) and do serious writing work until 8 a.m., at which point my time for “literary studies” was over for the day. Others work late at night, when much of the world is sleeping.

I am not saying the other work I have listed is not important. It is essential to the collective work of sustaining that complex bureaucracy we call a “college” or a “university,” or to keeping a given discipline or subdiscipline alive. I mean, however, that you cannot be sitting in a committee meeting evaluating a colleague for tenure and at the same time, as the letter from *Dædalus* requesting this essay put it, be returning yet once more to “a text . . . that inspired and continues to inspire the work [you] do,” or asking yourself, “What text would you want to see passed on to the next generation of scholars and why?”

I turn now to fulfilling my commission to choose a text and to answer the stated questions about it. I have found it impossible, however, to stick to a single text. My work has gone through several phases over the decades. (I don’t mean several theoretical orientations.) I therefore must briefly discuss two texts, not just one, with some other citations thrown in.

Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,
Tears from the depth of some divine despair
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,
In looking on the happy autumn-fields,
And thinking of the days that are no more.

Fresh as the first beam glittering on a sail,
That brings our friends up from the
underworld,
Sad as the last which reddens over one
That sinks with all we love below the verge;
So sad, so fresh, the days that are no more.

Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer
dawns
The earliest pipe of half-awaken’d birds
To dying ears, when unto dying eyes

The casement slowly grows a glimmering
square;
So sad, so strange, the days that are no more.

Dear as remembered kisses after death,
And sweet as those by hopeless fancy feign’d
On lips that are for others; deep as love,
Deep as first love, and wild with all regret;
O Death in Life, the days that are no more!

– Alfred, Lord Tennyson,
“Tears, Idle Tears” (1847)²

This is one of the songs from Tennyson’s long narrative poem, *The Princess*, an early poem about women’s liberation. (I have, by the way, downloaded Tennyson’s song from Wikipedia, to save the bother of typing it out and to hint at the way the Internet has transformed literary study.) In *The Princess*, a group of women have withdrawn from men’s society to form a new species of *gynæceum*, a women’s university where men are forbidden to enter. The poem is sung by one of Princess Ida’s maids, in the presence of the male narrator, who, with two friends, has invaded the Princess’s domain. They disguise themselves in drag. (I kid you not! Victorian literature contains many unexpected things.) Tennyson asserted that: “This song came to me on the yellowing autumn-tide at Tintern Abbey, full for me of its bygone memories. It is the sense of the abiding in the transient.”³ You will probably not be surprised to learn that in the end, the Princess and the invading Prince marry and live happily ever after, though the Prince promises to treat his wife as an equal. So much for the limits of women’s liberation in Tennyson’s imagination!

I did not know any of this when I first encountered the poem as a freshman or sophomore at Oberlin College in 1944 or 1945. It was simply given to me, if I remem-

ber correctly, as one among many poems to read for an introductory course, without any context or background information. Or perhaps I just somehow encountered it. Serendipity plays a big role in anyone's intellectual development. I was at that point a physics major. "Tears, Idle Tears" played a crucial role in my discovery that my true vocation or calling was for literary study.⁴ This was a major turning point in my life. I shifted from physics to English as my major in the middle of my sophomore year, in part so I could follow up the questions posed to me by this poem. I found, and still find, the poem extremely moving and beautiful. I wanted to go on having such pleasures and puzzlements as reading this poem gave me. I wanted, and still want, others to have similar pleasures and to be as puzzled as I was by the question of what the poem "really means," and why it is a good thing to read it interrogatively.

In spite of the good training in English literature I received at Oberlin and thereafter in graduate school at Harvard, I remain to this day puzzled by literary works, including this one. "Tears, Idle Tears" is a wonderful poem. I found it, however, an exceedingly strange, even scandalous, use of language. The word "strange" is, it happens, a key word in Tennyson's poem. In my science courses, I was taught to say the truth straightforwardly, to explain anomalies, and to use language in as uncomplicated a way as possible. Tennyson seemed to me to do no such things. Let me cite again just the first stanza. To do a full reading of the whole poem would take a great many pages:

Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,
Tears from the depth of some divine despair
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,
In looking on the happy autumn-fields,
And thinking of the days that are no more.

I asked myself, "What in the world does this mean?" I knew nothing of Ogden and Richards's *The Meaning of Meaning*.⁵ I did not mean anything "theoretical" by the question. I just wanted to be able to identify a straightforward rational meaning. My model was data from the stars that are read to "mean," for example, that such and such a star has a surface temperature of so and so. This assumption was based, by the way, on an incomplete understanding of the relations among hypothesis, data collection, and verification in scientific method. I took for granted, however, and still do, that Tennyson's words and figures are not just emotive blather, but that they have precise meaning that can be identified. I also took for granted, and still do, that the poem cannot be fully explained either by its function in *The Princess* or by other extrinsic factors, such as Tennyson's grief over his friend Arthur Hallam's early death. Hallam is buried near Tintern Abbey, where "Tears, Idle Tears," "came to" Tennyson. What does Tennyson mean by calling his tears idle? In what sense are these tears, or any other tears, idle? Why did he write, "I know not what they mean"? I did not know what they mean either. The poem is very beautiful. There is no doubt about that, but so what? And "tears from the depth of some divine despair"? What does "divine despair" mean? It must mean despair of some god. What god? Gods are not supposed to despair. What is this god in despair about? How could tears from the depth of some divine despair get into the poet's heart anyhow, and how could those tears get from his heart to his eyes? Up the aorta and so on, by a devious route? Why are the autumn-fields paradoxically "happy"? I thought they were just inhuman matter. Why personify them in this contrary-to-fact way?

In short, I had dozens of interrelated questions about just these few lines. Ten-

nyson's own comments, by the way, do not seem to me all that helpful. Just to say, as he did say, that the poem is about what he as a boy called "the passion of the past" and to add, "it is the distance that charms me in the landscape, the picture and the past, and not the immediate to-day in which I move,"⁶ evades more than it explains the question of what Tennyson meant, for example, by "the depth of some divine despair." It seems to me, moreover, that simply to read the poem out loud to students, as teachers often used to do, and to say how beautiful it is, is not enough. Yes, I agree. It is beautiful. But what does it *mean*? I think we are justified in demanding a high degree of "explicability" from literary works and in demanding that our teachers help students in this hermeneutic work. The poem can only correctly "do," performatively,⁷ if we know what it "means." Why, I continued to wonder, should it matter whether I read and understood this poem or not?

I wanted to figure out answers to these questions, to account for the poem in the way astrophysicists account for data from outer space. Decades after my shift from physics to literature, I wrote an essay trying, belatedly, to answer those questions I had about "Tears, Idle Tears."⁸ I say briefly below how I would answer those questions now.

What was wrongheaded about my original project took me some years to discover. I am still discovering it; that is, still trying to come to terms with the irreconcilability, as Paul de Man puts it, of hermeneutics and poetics, meaning and the way meaning is expressed.⁹ A shorthand description of my mistake would be to say that data from the stars and the linguistic "matter" that makes up poems require fundamentally different methodologies of "accounting for." Without intending to do so I had encountered the challenges of interpreting figurative language as used

in literature. I have spent my whole life since that fall of 1945 trying to account for this aspect of various presumptively literary works. That is what I most like to do: reading, teaching, lecturing, and writing about print literature, trying to figure out what a given text or poem really says, and passing that accounting-for to students in my courses and to readers of essays and books that I write. Though I have long been interested in theory, theory is, for me at least, not an end in itself. Theory is ancillary, a handmaid to reading literature. I need just as much theory as is necessary for that, and no more. Writing books and essays has for me, I add, always been indissolubly related to teaching and lecturing. Nothing beats trying out on a class a way of reading a given poem for finding out whether that reading "flies" or not.

I would say now that the first stanza of "Tears, Idle Tears" is a complex but entirely comprehensible extended figure of speech. Tears tend to arise spontaneously, often in ways that forbid knowing their meaning or expressing it rationally. In this case, the speaker of the poem weeps in looking at the happy autumn-fields and thinking of the days that are no more. An oxymoronic combination of presence and absence characterizes both autumn fields (which are still happily verdant but about to die) and the past as remembered. The past is vividly present to memory but is remembered as lost forever, just as the happy autumn-fields will soon be wintry. Both of these are something to weep about, partly because they imply my own mortality. In an analogous way, Gerard Manley Hopkins ends "Spring and Fall: to a young child," a poem about a little girl who weeps at the sight of "Goldengrove unleaving," by asserting that Margaret is, without knowing it or meaning it, weeping for her own mortality and for her share in original sin. The Fall of Adam and Eve was the cause of seasonal changes in the first place.

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No seasons pass in the Garden of Eden before the Fall. The resonances between Tennyson's poem and Hopkins's are evident, as well as the differences. Tennyson, for example, says nothing so overtly about original sin as Hopkins does:

Sórrows spríngs áre the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.¹⁰

Like the leaves in autumn, Margaret too will die, as will the speaker of "Tears, Idle Tears." The conflicted internal state of the latter is projected spontaneously as an oxymoronic personification into the "happy autumn-fields." The tears are "idle," the poem implies, because they are ineffective. Nothing will keep those leaves from falling, nor me from dying.

The most difficult part of Tennyson's extended image is those lines that describe the "idle tears" as coming from "the depth of some divine despair" rising in the heart and gathering to the eyes. This beautiful spatial trope is a version of the basic Christian assumption, going back to St. Augustine, and before that to the Bible, that at its depths the human self is grounded in God and continuous with Him. The speaker's tears come from God and move upward through his or her heart, the location of emotions, to his or her eyes. We weep only when we are deeply moved.

Tennyson's twist on this ancient theological trope is to think of God not as a solid rock, ground of the self, but as Himself divided, in a state of despair. God's despair, the rest of the poem makes clear, is over the impossibility, in the created human and natural worlds at least, since the Fall, of healing the fissure of presence and absence in the landscape and in memory. The latter is what Tennyson calls "the passion of the past" as that past is visibly embodied, for example, in

autumn-fields, or, later in the poem, in a ship disappearing below the horizon or rising above it once more.

The figurative interplay in the first five lines of "Tears, Idle Tears" is "complex" because it expresses triple substitutions among three regions: the landscape, the speaker's mind and feelings, and the relation between subjectivity and God. Each defined in terms of the others, in a perpetually shifting reciprocal interchange.

If you set your mind to it, with minimal knowledge of the Western tradition and of the way figurative language works, it is not all that difficult to "figure out" what Tennyson's poem "means." What is remarkable, however, is the complexity of the poetic or tropological thought that is compressed within these five lines that are so beautiful in rhythm, diction, and alliteration ("depth of some *divine despair*"). That beauty is evident even before you begin asking yourself what the words mean. If they were not so beautiful, who would care so much what they mean? Figuring out that meaning adds a strong surplus of pleasure, an "aha! moment" of comprehension or illumination, to the initial pleasure of the words' "music," as one might call it. My vocation or calling has remained, ever since those long ago days at Oberlin, to pass, as best I can, that double pleasure on to my students and readers.

Suddenly I saw the cold and rook-delighting
heaven
That seemed as though ice burned and was
but the more ice,
And thereupon imagination and heart were
driven
So wild that every casual thought of that
and this

Vanished, and left but memories, that
 should be out of season
 With the hot blood of youth, of love crossed
 long ago;
 And I took all the blame out of all sense and
 reason,
 Until I cried and trembled and rocked to
 and fro,
 Riddled with light. Ah! when the ghost
 begins to quicken,
 Confusion of the death-bed over, is it sent
 Out naked on the roads, as the books say,
 and stricken
 By the injustice of the skies for punishment?

–W. B. Yeats, “The Cold Heaven” (1916)¹¹

More and more, as the years have gone by, and though my vocation for literary study has remained steadfast, I have found myself, in rapidly changing university conditions, including the increasing globalization of literary study (study of so-called World Literature), being invited to conferences all over the world where I am asked to give lectures defending literary study.¹² One example is the International Conference on Literature Reading and Research that I attended in Guangzhou (once called Canton), China, in September 2010, held at the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. (Guangdong is the name of the province.) I chose in my lecture to take Yeats’s “The Cold Heaven” as a paradigmatic example of the difficulties of deciding whether or not we should read or teach literature now. The poem also exemplifies the difficulties of explaining such a text to students at home and globally. The poem comes from Yeats’s volume of 1916, *Responsibilities*.

I greatly admire this poem. It moves me immensely. It moves me so much that I want not only to read it but also to teach it and talk about it to anyone who will listen. I wish I could read it out loud now to

all my readers, with special stresses on “Suddenly” at the beginning and on the extraordinary long drawn-out “Ah!” that is the turning point of the poem. Poetry, after all, is an oral art, or should still be.

Well, should I read or teach this poem now, or not? I answer initially that there is no *should* about it, no compelling obligation or responsibility. I can read or teach it if I like, but that decision cannot easily be justified by anything beyond the call the poem itself makes on me to read it and to teach it. Least of all do I think I can tell students, colleagues, or administrators with a straight face that reading the poem or hearing me teach it is going to help them find a job, or help them mitigate climate change. Reading the poem with care might possibly, however, help students resist the lies told by the media, as I shall argue for literature in general below.

Reading “The Cold Heaven” or teaching it is, first and foremost, a good in itself, an end in itself, as Kant said all art is. The mystical poet Angelus Silesius (1624–1677) affirmed, in *The Cherubinic Wanderer*, that “The rose is without why; it blooms because it blooms.”¹³ Like that rose, “The Cold Heaven” is without why. The poem, like a rose, has no reason for being beyond itself. You can read it or not read it, as you like. It is its own end. Young people these days who watch films or television shows, or play video games, or listen to popular music do not, for the most part, attempt to justify what they do. They do it because they like to do it and because it gives them pleasure. An academic friend of mine from Bergen in Norway did not try to justify his pleasure and excitement in hearing at great expense the same Stevie Wonder concert twice, once in Rotterdam and once again in Bergen. He just emailed me his enthusiasm about the experience. It was a big deal for him, just as reading, talking, or writing about Yeats’s “The Cold Heaven” is a big deal for me. That importance, how-

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ever, is something I should not try to justify primarily by its practical or social utility. A natural response when I see a film I like or hear a concert that moves me is to want to tell other people about it, as my correspondent in Bergen wanted to tell everybody about those Stevie Wonder concerts. These tellings most often take the form, "Wow! I saw a wonderful movie last night. Let me tell you about it." I suggest that my desire to teach Yeats's "The Cold Heaven" takes much the same form: "Wow! I have just read a wonderful poem by Yeats. Let me read it to you and tell you about it." That telling, naturally enough, takes the form of wanting to pass on what I think other readers might find helpful to lead them to respond to the poem as enthusiastically as I do.

I list, in an order following that of the poem, some of the things that might need to be explained not only, for example, to a young Chinese reader, but also, no doubt, to a video-game-playing Western young person ignorant of European poetry. Literary scholar David Damrosch, in his book on world literature, presupposes with equanimity, as do I, that when a given piece of literature circulates into a different culture from that of its origin, it will be read differently.¹⁴ I am not talking here, however, about a high-level culturally embedded reading, but just about making sense of Yeats's poem. This need to make sense might arise, for example, in trying to decide how to translate this or that phrase into Chinese or some other non-English language.

Here are some things, in the form of truncated notations, that it might be good to know when trying to understand "The Cold Heaven":

- 1) Something about Yeats's life and works.
- 2) An explanation of the verse form used: three iambic hexameter quatrains rhyming abab. Is it an odd sort of sonnet

in hexameters rather than pentameters, and missing the last couplet? How does this form contribute to the poem's force and meaning?

- 3) Knowledge of the recurrent use of "sudden" or "suddenly" in Yeats's lyrics, as in the opening of "Leda and the Swan" – "A sudden blow . . ." (VP, 441) – or in the fourth section of "Vacillation": "While on the shop and street I gazed / My body of a sudden blazed; / And twenty minutes more or less / It seemed, so great my happiness, / That I was blessed and could bless" (VP, 501). In Yeats's poetry, insight tends to happen abruptly, unforeseeably, making a sharp break between before and after.

- 4) What sort of bird a rook is and why rooks are delighted by cold weather.

- 5) The double meaning of "heaven," as "skies" and as the supernatural realm beyond the skies, as in the opening of the Lord's Prayer, said daily by millions of Christians: "Our Father who art in heaven"; compare "skies" at the end of "The Cold Heaven": "the injustice of the skies for punishment."

- 6) An explanation of oxymorons (burning ice) and of the history in Western poetry of this particular one.

- 7) Attempt to explain the semantic difference between "imagination" and "heart," as well as the nuances of each word.

- 8) Explanation of "crossed" in "memories . . . of love crossed long ago," both the allusion to Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet as "star-crossed lovers," that is, as fated by the stars to disaster in love, and the reference to the biographical fact of Yeats's disastrous love for Maud Gonne. She rejected his proposals of marriage repeatedly, though they had slept together twice, so it is to some degree absurd for him to take responsibility for the failure of their love. He did his best to persuade her to marry him.

9) Account of the difference between “sense” and “reason” in “I took the blame out of all sense and reason,” or is this just tautological? Yeats scholar A. Norman Jeffares cites T. R. Henn’s explanation that “‘out of all sense’ is an Irish (and ambiguous) expression meaning both ‘to an extent far beyond what common sense could justify’ and ‘beyond the reach of sensation.’”¹⁵

10) Explanation of the double meaning of the verb “riddle” in the marvelous phrase, “riddled with light”: “riddle” meaning punctured with holes, and “riddle” as having a perhaps unanswered riddle or conundrum posed to one. Being riddled with light is paradoxical because light is supposed to be illuminating, not obscuring.

11) Unsnarling of the lines centering on “quicken” in “when the ghost [meaning disembodied soul] begins to quicken, / Confusion of the death bed over.” “Quick-en” usually refers to the coming to life of the fertilized egg in the womb. An erotic love-bed scene is superimposed on the death-bed one.

12) “As the books say”: which books? Those books in esoteric philosophy and folklore that Yeats read.

13) Relate “injustice of the skies for punishment” to the usual assumption that heaven only punishes justly, gives us our just deserts after death. Why and how can the skies be unjust? By blaming him for something that was not his fault? Connect this to Greek and later tragedy. It is not Oedipus’s fault that he has killed his father and fathered children with his mother, or is it? After all, he did commit parricide and incest, even though unintentionally.

14) Why is the last sentence a question? Is it a real question or a merely rhetorical one? Would the answer find its place if the blank that follows the twelve lines of this defective sonnet were filled? The poem seems both too much in line lengths and too little in number of lines.

15) Finally, Chinese readers, as well as Western ones, might like to know, or might even observe on their own, that Yeats, like other European poets of his generation, was influenced in this poem and elsewhere by what he knew, or thought he knew, through translations, of Chinese poetry and Chinese ways of thinking. The volume *Responsibilities*, which contains “The Cold Heaven,” has an epigraph from someone Yeats calls, somewhat pretentiously, “Khong-Fou-Tseu,” presumably Confucius: “How am I fallen from myself, for a long time now / I have not seen the Prince of Chang in my dreams” (VP, 269). Chinese readers and readers generally might have a lot to say about this Chinese connection and about how it makes “The Cold Heaven” a work of world literature.

All this information would be given to my hearers or readers, however, not to “expand their minds,” but in the hope that it might help them admire the poem as much as I do and be moved by it as much as I am. Being moved in the right way, I argue, depends on understanding, or should do so. The affect is a performative effect of comprehending the words rightly. Yeats’s poem can hardly be described as “uplifting,” since its thematic climax is a claim that the skies are unjust and punish people for things of which they are not guilty. That is a terrifying wisdom. Telling others about this poem is not something I *should* do but something I cannot help doing, something the poem urgently calls on me to do.

I end by asserting the irreplaceable value of literature and literary studies. First the bad news, then the good. Most people know that enrollments in literature courses have gone down and that people nowadays read less print literature. This diminishing of literary studies has been brought about partly by the gradual turning of our colleges and universities in the direction

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of becoming trade schools, preparation for getting a job. Such institutions have less and less place for the humanities in the old sense of their essential role in a liberal arts education.¹⁶

Perhaps even more threatening to old-fashioned literary studies, however, has been the amazingly rapid development of new teletechnologies that are fast making printed book literature obsolete, a thing of the past. Even many of those who could teach literature, who were hired to do so, choose rather, for good reasons, to teach other topics instead: the history of Western imperialism, or film, or video games, or some one among the multitude of race, gender, or performance studies, or another of those myriad and still-proliferating other interests that have replaced or subordinated literature for many humanists. More and more courses are being offered not in a classroom, but as MOOCs, massive open online courses, circulating on the Internet. A large proportion of these are in math, science, and economics, but some are in the humanities.¹⁷ Millions of students already use them. MOOCs are on the face of it problematic and controversial, but I doubt if that will stop their proliferation, nor their rapid transformation of higher education. If a new telecommunication technology exists, its widespread use seems for some reason irresistible. Who would have thought that iPhones, Google, Facebook, and Twitter would so quickly become indispensable to so many millions worldwide?

Our present-day humanists can hardly be blamed for wanting to teach what interests them, what has shaped their lives and those of their students. Though an immense number of books, essays, and courses about print literature are still being produced or taught each year, enrollment in courses on such old-fashioned topics as “The Victorian Novel” is considerably down in most colleges and universities.

New monographs about print literature, however sophisticated they may be about narrative theory and literary history, typically sell only a few hundred copies at most, whereas a successful video game sells millions of copies and does really have a big cultural effect on a lot of people, for better or worse. If Shakespeare were to return today, he would most likely not write plays but film or television scripts or, perhaps, employ the latest technology and “write” video games.

The new digital devices – computers, iPhones, iPads, Facebook, Twitter, video games, and the like – are rapidly diminishing the role literature plays in many people’s lives. A lot of people these days play video games or watch films on Netflix or surf the net instead of reading printed literature. That is a big loss, but it is not the end of civilization, any more than was the shift from manuscript culture to print culture.

Now the good news: The reading, study, and teaching of literature is surviving more strongly than one might expect even in the midst of an exceedingly rapid and no doubt irreversible global change from one dominant medium (print) to another (digital). A lot of people continue to read literature, but in digital form – on Kindles and the like. I walked down an airplane aisle not long ago and spotted ten people reading what looked like novels, but eight of them were doing that on an e-reader. At least they were reading literature, not playing video games. An amazing number of literary works (in the old-fashioned sense of printed novels, poems, and plays) are now available online either for free or for a few dollars. These digital versions are usually searchable, which is a great help in certain kinds of literary study. It is no longer necessary to be near a big university library to have access to a vast array of literary works. That is a strong force for democracy. I was able not long

ago to see for the first time, in its Kindle version, the first edition of Trollope's *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, complete with the illustrations. Few libraries have that book, and the illustrations, so far as I know, have not been reprinted. Through the Internet I was granted access to the original multimedia version of Trollope's novel. Wikipedia, used with the skepticism any encyclopedia requires, puts a huge amount of factual information at one's fingertips. "Digitalization" has transformed the way I do literary study: that is, read literature, write about it, and talk about it.

Multitudes of teachers in the United States and globally, moreover, both young ones and old ones, are every day quietly teaching their students as best they can a love of literature and how best to read it. Many of these are brilliant teachers of literature. They are my unsung heroes and heroines. Though the "one size fits all" aspect of the Common Core in math, science, writing, and reading that is now being officially adopted by many U.S. states makes me a little anxious, nevertheless the actual Common Core document does include learning to read literature, and it shows some flexibility in identifying what sorts of literary works should be taught, and how.

In addition, an increasing number of thoughtful books and essays asking "Why Literature?" are beginning to appear these days. These are quite different from those hand-wringing books and essays about the "corporatization" of the university and the decline of the humanities, useful as such works are. The works I have in mind also differ from the studies based on cognitive science that report what part of my brain lights up when I read "Tears, Idle Tears," "The Cold Heaven," or *Middlemarch* – something also useful to know.

I shall identify five works in the "Why Literature?" genre. They are based on hands-on experience in the classroom.

Teachers with such experience are perhaps a more trustworthy source of information, along with students themselves, about why we should read literature and how best to teach it than department chairs, deans, and administrators, anxious as the latter often are to preserve literature as a social and personal force. The books and essays I have in mind are, significantly, written by teachers at both ends of the spectrum of academic status. One of the best of these, Cristina Vischer Bruns's *Why Literature? The Value of Literary Reading and What It Means for Teaching*,¹⁸ is by a brilliant and dedicated young scholar-teacher. She has nevertheless remained in adjunct status at a good but less well-known university, Chapman University, in Orange County, California. Bruns speaks eloquently, on the basis of what it is like to teach literature at Chapman, in favor of what she calls "immersive" reading. Such reading, she holds, should only later on be augmented by theoretical reflection.

Two additional examples of such books are by Mark Edmundson, a University Professor at the University of Virginia. His is a very different life-situation from Bruns's. One of Edmundson's books is called *Why Teach? In Defense of a Real Education*, the other is *Why Read?*¹⁹

My fourth example is another brilliant young scholar who has published a number of excellent books and articles but has yet to find a permanent university teaching position. He is Éamonn Dunne, an Irishman and schoolteacher whose first doctorate was from University College Dublin. Dunne is now returning to Trinity College Dublin to earn a second doctorate in education. His thesis proposal, "Unlearning to Read: Towards a New Pedagogy of Ignorance," is a fascinating proposal throughout; but for my purposes here it is important because of Dunne's intention to undertake empirical studies, using his own students, about what actu-

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ally goes on in the classroom and in the minds and feelings of students when they read literature.

My final example is a forthcoming special issue of the journal *SubStance*, edited by Ranjan Ghosh of the University of North Bengal.²⁰ Under the title “Does Literature Matter?” the issue gathers essays on this topic by a wide range of scholars.

I cite these five titles to indicate that those who love literature and want to teach it are turning thoughtfully to its defense in the context of the global shift to digital media and on the basis of their actual teaching experience.

I end now by naming several uses reading literature and teaching it can have even in our radically new social, cultural, and technological situation.

No doubt the real world is transformed by being turned into literature, but I see no reason to deny that we learn a lot about that real world now and in the past by reading literature. Two examples among almost innumerable ones are: 1) we can learn about Victorian class structure and courtship/marriage conventions by reading Anthony Trollope’s novels; and 2) we can learn a lot about the nineteenth-century city of London by reading Dickens’s novels. Such learning is of great value.

In addition, we can learn from literary works the way what might be called “ideological mistakes” often come to be made, namely by taking figurative language literally. “We all of us, grave or light, get our thoughts entangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them,” says George Eliot’s narrator in *Middlemarch*.²¹ The novel gives a striking example of this in the way the intelligent and sensitive heroine, Dorothea Brooke, thinks the dry-as-dust scholar, Edward Casaubon, is like Augustine, Milton, Bossuet, Oberlin, or Pascal. Therefore, marrying Casaubon would be like marrying one or another of these worthies. I do not think George Eliot

makes in this section of *Middlemarch*, or in the novel generally, a sharp distinction between metaphorical identity and the comparisons of simile. “Metaphor” is for her a generic term for tropological displacements. Much fiction deals thematically with imaginary characters who, like Dorothea Brooke, are wrong in their readings of others: for example, Elizabeth Bennett in her misreading of Darcy in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, or Isabel Archer’s misreading of Gilbert Osmond in Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*, or the disastrous effect on Conrad’s Lord Jim of reading too many adventure stories. Flaubert’s Emma Bovary and Cervantes’s Don Quixote are Jim’s predecessors in making that mistake. All three think life is really going to be like the romances they have read.

Getting students to see this aspect of fictions might possibly lead them to keep a sharper eye out for the lies politicians, advertising, and mass media tell by manipulation of false figurative transfers. Paul de Man’s claim, in “The Resistance to Theory,” that “the linguistics of literariness is a powerful and indispensable tool in the unmasking of ideological aberrations, as well as a determining factor in accounting for their occurrence,”²² seems blatantly counterintuitive. What de Man says might seem more plausible if we understand that what he means by “the linguistics of literariness” is not something unique to literature as such but a dismaying feature of language in general, including the language of politicians and admen. Those admirable op-ed writers for *The New York Times*, Paul Krugman and Maureen Dowd, use “the linguistics of literariness” as one of their major tools in the unmasking of ideological aberrations. Dowd uses irony to devastating effect in her unmasking, and Krugman has repeatedly pointed out that conservatives’ propaganda for austerity depends on a false

analogy between household finances and spending by the federal government. Believing that is like Dorothea believing that Casaubon is like Milton or Pascal. Politicians whose policies are modeled on Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* are making the same mistake Lord Jim did when he thought reality was going to be like (or ought to be like) the children's romances he had read. If we learn about the real world by reading literature, the danger of taking figures of speech literally is one of the major things we can learn.

Even more important, as an indispensable function of reading literary works, is the sheer pleasure of entering an alternative imaginary world. We do this by way of the words on the page. Every work opens a different and unique world. This pleasure of entering a new world is a good in itself, as I have claimed for my pleasure in reading Yeats's "The Cold Heaven." It needs no further justification. The need for the imaginary seems to be a basic feature of human nature. A slow immersive reading of *Middlemarch* does not just teach you about "the linguistics of literariness." It also allows you to dwell for a prolonged period in a wonderfully vivid fictitious world peopled by characters that seem as real as real people and are better known than our real neighbors.

The other pleasure of dwelling in an imaginary world is a kind of surplus joy. This is the sheer delight of felicitous and unexpected language. Roland Barthes, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, named this pleasure with the more or less untranslatable French word *jouissance*.²³ The word means "joy," but also has an erotic overtone. This bodily and mental delight is usually caused by some shimmering of word play, as in George Eliot's image of thoughts *entangled* in metaphors or Yeats's marvelous phrase, "riddled with light."

The pleasure caused by felicitous and surprising language is the hardest aspect

of literature to carry over into the new media. Films, video games, and television sitcoms are no doubt also alternative worlds, but they cannot easily match the pleasurable linguistic complexity of literary works, as the relative thinness of language in films made from classic novels attests. The narrative voice and the characters' interior thoughts and feelings vanish, to be replaced by faces on the screen and dialogue. Those faces and their talk have their own power, but it is a different sort of power from the words on the page. It is only partly linguistic. One often waits in vain to hear in a film version some piece of wordplay that has caused *jouissance* in reading the print text original.

Helping students share in my joy of the text is what I do as a humanist and feel I ought to do. As you can see, I have not come all that far from my initial desire to account, to myself and to others, for the strange ways Tennyson uses language and for my delight in this strangeness. The contexts in which I go on performing that work have, however, changed considerably, to say the least.

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- ¹ Sections of this essay have been given in earlier form as lectures in the United States, Europe, and China.
- ² Text copied from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tears,_Idle_Tears (accessed December 27, 2012).
- ³ Cited in *The Poems of Tennyson*, 3 vols., ed. Christopher Ricks, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), vol. 2, 232.
- ⁴ I might also have cited in this essay Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, which I read at about that time, with its striking opening lines: "I am a sick man. . . . I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I believe my liver is diseased." (I quote the Project Gutenberg e-text.) This novel, too, is "a text . . . that inspired and continues to inspire the work [I] do." When I read those opening words, I said to myself (remember, I was a sophomore), "Aha! Here at last is someone like me." The recognition of such kinships is one of the important things that reading literature can do.
- ⁵ C. K. Ogden, I. A. Richards, et al., *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co.; New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1923).
- ⁶ Cited in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Ricks, vol. 2, 232.
- ⁷ See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980). See also J. Hillis Miller, *Speech Acts in Literature* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001).
- ⁸ J. Hillis Miller, "Temporal Topographies: Tennyson's Tears," *Victorian Poetry* 30 (3–4) (Autumn/Winter 1992): 277–289; also included in J. Hillis Miller, *Topographies* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), 134–149.
- ⁹ Paul de Man, "The Task of the Translator," in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 87–88.
- ¹⁰ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems*, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. Mackenzie, 4th ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 88–89.
- ¹¹ W. B. Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 316; henceforth noted parenthetically as VP, followed by the page number. "The Cold Heaven" was first published in *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1912). The poem is available online at, among other sites, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172059> (accessed January 15, 2013). Poem reprinted here by permission of United Agents on behalf of Grainne Yeats.
- ¹² Denis Donoghue reminds me that literary scholar Kathleen Woodward, in a 2009 issue of *Dædalus* devoted to "Reflecting on the Humanities," asserted that although in 1990 the ACLS's *Report from the National Task Force on Scholarship and the Public Humanities* could confidently affirm that the humanities "are valuable for their own sake and that the nation must assert and sustain scholarship because that enriches the common fund of knowledge," "today," in Woodward's words, "the notion of the intrinsic good of the humanities is definitely not a part of what is generally referred to as 'making the case' for the humanities"; see Kathleen Woodward, "The Future of the Humanities – in the Present & in Public," *Dædalus* 138 (1) (Winter 2009): 110–111. Professor Woodward ought to know, since she has served as president of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (1995–2001) and has organized or attended innumerable humanities conferences, as well as helping write many "reports" about the humanities. Because her essay is about the need for what she calls "public scholarship," I suppose she means that the humanities must justify themselves nowadays by their public utility, not as ends in themselves. At one point in her essay, Woodward laments that literary scholars are more or less out of the loop of such discussions: "it is a fact that literary criticism is read virtually *only* by other literary critics (and perhaps not that many). . . . What

would public literary criticism look like?" (120). I would hardly dare to claim that this present essay is an example of "public literary criticism," but it is an attempt to write as plainly as I can about two actual examples of literature. Another essay in that same issue of *Daedalus*, literary critic Michael Wood's "A World without Literature?" (pp. 58–67), is an eloquent defense of reading literature and of writing and reading criticism of literary works. Citing Coetzee and Calvino, Wood asserts that a "classic" is "the work or story through which we think our lives, and without which our lives are not quite thinkable. Both writers [Coetzee and Calvino], notably, associate thought and endurance with criticism" (65).

- ¹³ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angelus_Silesius (accessed January 15, 2013), where the saying is cited from an essay by Jorge Luis Borges, *Die Rose ist ohne warum; sie blühet weil sie blühet*. See <http://www.amazon.com/Angelus-Silesius-Cherubinic.../dp/0809127687> (accessed June 6, 2013) for a reference to an English translation of *The Cherubinic Wanderer*.
- ¹⁴ See David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003).
- ¹⁵ A. Norman Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1968), 146.
- ¹⁶ Recent articles have put forth more information and opinion about the current state of the humanities and of literary study within the humanities. David Brooks, in an op-ed piece in *The New York Times*, laments – I think to some degree wrongheadedly – the growing failure in humanities teaching "to cultivate the human core, the part of the person we might call the spirit, the soul, or, in D. H. Lawrence's phrase, 'the dark vast forest'"; see David Brooks, "The Humanist Vocation," *The New York Times*, June 20, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/21/opinion/brooks-the-humanist-vocation.html?hp&_r=2&. These days the humanities, says Brooks, are "less about the old notions of truth, beauty and goodness and more about political and social categories like race, class and gender." I think a lot of truth, beauty, and goodness is still taught in courses that may nevertheless be about race, class, and gender. The two sets of categories are not incompatible. As for declining enrollments in humanities courses, a forceful essay in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* by Michael Bérubé, who has just finished his term as president of the Modern Language Association, demonstrates, with a lot of statistics, that enrollments in humanities courses have remained at a steady 7 percent for decades; see Michael Bérubé, "The Humanities Declining? Not According to the Numbers," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 1, 2013, http://chronicle.com/article/The-Humanities-Declining-Not/140093/?utm_content=buffer19e54&utm_source=buffer&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=Buffer. My topic, however, is literary study, not the humanities in general. Statistics confirm that studying literature has declined substantially, at least in some colleges and universities. This has perhaps happened to some degree not by an increase in business and science majors but by a migration of students from literature courses to film studies, creative writing, women's studies, cultural studies, media studies, visual and performing arts, and so on. These are all worthy subjects of study, but they are not the same as literary study. According to writer Verlyn Klinkenborg, "In 1991, 165 students graduated from Yale with a B.A. in English literature. By 2012, that number was 62"; see Verlyn Klinkenborg, "The Decline and Fall of the English Major," *The New York Times*, June 22, 2013. That is an amazing reduction, even if the average percentage of English majors nationwide has remained approximately the same (1.1 percent of the college-age population in 2011, as against 1.3 percent in 1991). Since this essay was first drafted, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences has published a forceful defense of the humanities and social sciences developed by its Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences, a group of more than fifty distinguished experts from university administration, the professoriate, the performing arts, public and cultural institutions, and private corporations; see *The Heart of the Matter: The Humanities and Social Sciences for a Vibrant, Competitive, and Secure Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2013). This cogent and detailed report suggests that the Academy believes the humanities are at present in need of stronger defense and more support, including financial support as well as legitimization support.

- ¹⁷ For two recent discussions of MOOCs, see Ramin Rahimian, “Virtual U.,” *The New York Times*, January 6, 2013; and Nathan Heller, “Laptop U: Has the Future of College Moved Online?” *The New Yorker*, May 20, 2013, 80–91.
- ¹⁸ Cristina Vischer Bruns, *Why Literature? The Value of Literary Reading and What It Means for Teaching* (New York: Continuum, 2011).
- ¹⁹ Mark Edmundson, *Why Read?* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004); and Mark Edmundson, *Why Teach? In Defense of a Real Education* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).
- ²⁰ Special issue of *SubStance*, “Does Literature Matter?” ed. Ranjan Ghosh, 42 (2) (2013).
- ²¹ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Rosemary Ashton (London: Penguin, 1994), 85.
- ²² Paul de Man, “The Resistance to Theory,” in *The Resistance to Theory*, 11.
- ²³ Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973); *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, with a note by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975). Though I have great respect for Barthes’s influential book, I cannot follow him in the sharp distinction he makes between literary texts that give pleasure by reaffirming ideological presuppositions we already have (Proust) and those that give the *jouissance* of something that upsets those presuppositions (Robbe-Grillet). Proust’s ways with language, like Dickens’s and Trollope’s, for example, give me ideology-challenging *jouissance* even more than does Robbe-Grillet, who seems a little old hat and artificial these days, in spite of his striking narrative innovations.