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# Leaving Literature Behind

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## **The professionalization of the field is turning students off**

The major victory of professors of literature in the last half-century — the Great March from the New Criticism through structuralism, deconstruction, Foucauldianism, and multiculturalism — has been the invention and codification of a professionalized study of literature. We've made ourselves into a priestly caste: To understand literature, we tell students, you have to come to us. Yet professionalization is a pyrrhic victory: We've won the battle but lost the war. We've turned revelation into drudgery, shut ourselves in airless rooms, and covered over the windows.

The good news is that we've created a discipline: literary studies. The bad news is that we've made ourselves rulers of a realm that has separated itself almost completely from the rest of the world. In the process, we've lost many of the students — I'd say, many of them men — and even some of the professors. And yet still we teach literature as if to future versions of ourselves — not that there will be many jobs for them. The vast majority of students don't even want to be professors: They'd like to get something from a book they can use in their lives outside the classroom. What right have we to forget them?

Students get something out of a book by reading it. Love of reading was, after all, what got most of us into this business to begin with. We are killing that experience with the discipline of literary studies, with its network of relations in which an individual work almost becomes incidental. But it's the individual work that changes lives.

My students at the U.S. Naval Academy, for example, mostly male and conservative, scream bloody murder if, as I sometimes do, I ask them to read Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* as part of our introductory course. (Tenured full professors teach freshmen here at Navy.) They come to class the first day — they've read up through Emma's disenchantment with her boring husband, Charles — incensed.

"Sir," they say flatly, "she's a slut." (The women tend to be harder on Emma than the men are.) Subsequent class periods get even uglier. Many of the men admit that they're fearful of marrying and then having their stay-at-home wives cheat on them. For that reason, they say, "you've got to get her pregnant before you deploy." Emma is their worst nightmare. Emma should have been faithful to Charles! He loved her! He was a good provider! What more does she want?

Initially the students have trouble seeing any resemblance between themselves and Emma: In their view, they're free individuals and have chosen to come here to college.

The dogma of their upbringing in most cases holds that individuals can make something of themselves if they are motivated enough. They can't imagine being stuck in Emma's position.

You're being too literal, I say. Most of you aren't female, and in any case, you aren't constrained by lack of education, social class, or the expectations of a provincial world. Then I remind them of the constraints that do bind them, as occupants of the lowest rung of a rigidly hierarchical system where the sometimes arbitrary fiat of officers or even upperclassmen rule their lives. If anybody can understand poor, confined Emma, it should be them. Hmm, they say.

Besides, I ask — I'm moving in on them now — Emma has dreams. Don't you remember the dreams that brought you to Annapolis?

Now they are silent. They do remember those dreams: inflated, Hollywood-fueled dreams of heroism on the battlefield, of overcoming Evil Enemies of America, and of swinging swords in their strong right arms, dreams of duty, honor, country. Where are those dreams now? I ask. They're, after all, the military-male version of Emma's dreams of perfect fulfillment in marriage. Perhaps they were never viable? Is it better to let them die completely than to try and keep them alive, as Emma does?

Annapolis, they tell me, is the place dreams come to die in the daily grind of shining shoes and passing inspections. And the verdict of society is as strong here as on poor Emma: There's only one way to do things here at Annapolis — those who think differently have to give in.

The way to stay sane, I suggest, is to have achievable dreams, not unrealistic ones. By the time we move on to other works, they still think Emma is "a slut" (which, arguably, she is) but at least — they admit grudgingly — they understand her a bit better. And that means, in turn, they may avoid the cynicism that invariably overtakes our students when they realize that neither Annapolis nor the military is anything like what's sold by Hollywood. And they may be less eager to marry someone they don't know the day after they graduate from the Academy, something which used to be more widespread. By watching Emma's torture they may — just may — avoid living it out themselves. That is the kind of use to which literature, and its teaching in college, can legitimately be put.

Literary studies split off from reading in the early-to-mid-20th century as the result of science envy on the part of literature professors. Talking about books somehow didn't seem substantial enough. Instead of reading literature, now we study "texts." We've developed a discipline, with its jargon and its methodology, its insiders and its body of knowledge. What we analyze nowadays is seen neither as the mirror of nature nor the lamp of authorial inspiration. It just is — apparently produced in an airless room by machines working through permutations of keys on the computer.

Science has its objective world, the entirety of what is. The world of texts is the objectivity of literary studies. Thus we can insist that there's no objective world outside

texts — as the impish Derrida claimed. (But how un-impishly he was echoed in the halls of American academe for so many decades!) And we can also get some mileage out of insisting that canons, the choice of what texts we take down from the library shelves to teach students, are merely "constructed." Of course they are — every reading list is limited. What we really mean is that our own pet author was forgotten when the canon was formed. The door shut too soon. If our boy or girl were inside the door rather than out, the fact of "construction" would be trivial. Teach my author! we cry. Not that one! What if who's taught, or isn't, doesn't end up mattering to the students, who don't share professorial concerns? To us it matters, and we're the ones in charge.

We're not teaching literature, we're teaching the professional study of literature: What we do is its own subject. Nowadays the academic study of literature has almost nothing to do with the living, breathing world outside. The further along you go in the degree ladder, and the more rarified a college you attend, the less literary studies relates to the world of the reader. The academic study of literature nowadays isn't, by and large, about how literature can help students come to terms with love, and life, and death, and mistakes, and victories, and pettiness, and nobility of spirit, and the million other things that make us human and fill our lives. It's, well, academic, about syllabi and hiring decisions, how works relate to each other, and how the author is oppressing whomever through the work. The literary critic Gerald Graff famously told us to "teach the conflicts": We and our squabbles are what it's all about. That's how we made a discipline, after all.

You wouldn't think we'd so focus on the power of written works with the United States engaged in regime change using guns and soldiers — some of them my students. That, it would seem, would be real power. But of course, it's a literature professor telling the story; this skewing of reality makes perfect sense. At least to other literature professors.

Nowadays we teach literature as if we were giving a tour of a grocery store to Martians who've just touched down on Earth. We professional storekeepers explain the vegetable section, the dairy section, the meat section, note similarities and differences among our wares, variations of texture and color, the fact that there's no milk where the applesauce is, and perhaps the fact (which we bemoan) that there are no papayas. We're teaching the store, not what's in it. We don't presuppose visitors know anything about where the things on display came from; if they do, it's because we told them — that can be our work too, speaking of the world before it ended up in the grocery store. But we're the ones who decide whether or not to include that world outside, and how much. We just want to rack up sales. All this fixation by the storekeepers on the store misses the point: People grow food in order to eat it. Similarly, books are meant to be read. Reading is the point of a book, not integrating it into a discipline.

In graduate school, professors learn to specialize, for which the justification is that we're contributing our bit to the realm of Knowledge about literature. Students, it's been noted, rarely share our passion for the tiny bit of the field we cultivate. That has led to the widely discussed gulf between graduate studies and undergraduate courses. Universities have bridged that gap by giving undergraduate classes to the younger, less

professionalized professors. But those young people who teach the young often cannot make clear the larger issues, the things that can actually be of some use to undergraduates. (Plus, they're learning the jargonized speech of the priestly class, and they tend to try it out on their charges.)

All this is harming our students. Reading literature can change their lives — and ours. The thing is, we don't quite understand how this process works — nor will we ever understand. Certainly we can't predict it past a certain point. That's why reading literature can't be a discipline. I, a straight white American male, can see myself in a black character or a female one, understand a point made by a dead Russian or a living Albanian, meditate on an abstract point made by an anonymous author. But that equally means that an X reader (say, black, gay, Albanian) need not read an X author (or character?) to get something from a work. Reading literature doesn't require us to check our list of identifying adjectives to see if we'll understand. Instead, we just have to dive in. Maybe we'll sink, maybe we'll swim. Nobody can tell beforehand. That's the beauty of books.

Interaction with literature can never be the basis of a systematic undertaking: It's all too scattershot. All we can do is describe the sense of looking up from a page full of little black and white squiggles with the feeling that suddenly we understand our own lives, that names have been given to things that lacked them, and that the iron filings that hitherto were scattered about have configured into a clear pattern. Things are different now — somehow. Maybe that will cause us to act differently, maybe not.

Literary study in the classroom nowadays offers views of the work of literature rather like the views of Mt. Fuji in Hokusai's celebrated spring series on "100 Views of Mt. Fuji." In each view, the mountain, while present, is frequently tiny and in a corner, viewed (in the most famous print) beyond the crest of a wave whose foam seems to make fingers at the edges, or (in another) through a hoop that a barrel-maker is shaping.

Those are not the front-and-center shots on a postcard. They foreground the angle of the mountain, its treatment, much the way a literature professor does with a funky viewpoint that got him or her tenure. Of course the postcard shot has its own point, but in a real sense it's more neutral than the angled treatment. It doesn't push our noses in its approach: It defers to the object it is depicting. We're far more conscious of the treatment of Mt. Fuji in an artsy Hokusai print than we are in a postcard shot. And that means, we're all but compelled to see the mountain the way it's presented, rather than being able to work on our own presentation. That's why literary studies is intrinsically coercive.

The premodern classroom — up until, say, the New Criticism, that first critical application of modernism — never denied that each individual student might be making his or her individual "View of Mt. Fuji" from the postcard shot the professor was supposed to be presenting. But those views were individual, and no claims were made for them beyond that. The power of the professor in the professionalized classroom —

and the pressure on students to conform — is thus exponentially greater than it was before people started thinking that the point was the "View of Mt. Fuji" rather than Mt. Fuji viewed. If you want a good grade, you adopt that viewpoint. That's what's being taught, after all. Several generations of students have by now learned to give in to the power of the literary-studies professor — and hated every minute of it.

There is a point to college or university guidance of literature. Most people never read serious literature at all without a guide. Too, people get more sophisticated as they have things pointed out to them, or as they read more. And many people just don't know what they may read to begin with. So there's a reason for teaching. We professors just have to remember that the books are the point, not us. We need, in short, to get beyond literary studies. We're not scientists, we're coaches. We're not transmitting information, at least not in the sense of teaching a discipline. But we do get to see our students react, question, develop, and grow. If you like life, that's satisfaction enough.