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Teaching Desire and Form Before Content

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The topic of today's forum is gigantic. Some would say that it is *gargantuan*, and I really cannot pretend to be in a position to address it appropriately. So I will take it upon myself to reduce its scope. To begin with, I will not even attempt to talk about the digital age. We all know — all too well — what the Digital Age means: it is overwhelmingly present around us, even threatening to overpower us if we do not remain vigilant. It is also greatly beneficial to our research and, most of the time, to our teaching endeavors.¹ Nevertheless, as an educator, a teacher, a voracious reader — indeed, as a great consumer of literature — preferably in the form of tangible books rather than electronic files, I will, for the sake of argument, temporarily ignore the existence of any digital age. I will place literature itself at the center of my remarks, secretly hoping that across the street from us, there is another forum taking place titled: “Computer Science in the Age of Global Literature: The Place of the Internet Today!” But that would be another story. . . .

I will essentially highlight two main trains of thought. The first one has to do with literature itself, particularly with what literature is *not*, what it does *not* do, and, conversely, what it *is* or *ought to be*. The second train of thought has to do with the sort of interaction that can actually take place in a classroom where, in spite of and beyond any digital age, literature occupies center-stage. I would like to discuss what I modestly, but passionately, attempt to do in the classroom with my students, not really as a *teacher* of literature — I do not profess to *teach* literature *per se* — but rather as a teacher of desire: the *desire* to read, the *desire* to embrace literature as a standard, common, ordinary, daily, healthy, completely taken-for-granted human endeavor and necessary practice.

What literature is and what it is not

Literature has no purpose — it serves no particular purpose. It *is*.
It does *not* prevent wars — never has and probably never will.
It does *not* feed hungry stomachs... although it is said to nurture souls.
It will *not* prevent our planet from warming up.
It does *not* contribute to the economic development of the world
— or hardly so.

And that is why literature is utterly essential and indispensable — actually, these are the very reasons why literature is wholly necessary to our intellec-

tual and emotional survival, because it serves *no one* and *nothing* in particular or in an exclusive sort of way. Perhaps literature is the most inclusive of human endeavors. It is *free* — it may be costly to produce, but it is a *gratuitous act of production*.

Literature *has time* — much more time than we, human readers, writers, and editors, have. Much more time than we mortal creatures will ever have. Actually, literature *is* time. Literature is, however, highly *time-consuming* to read, as it is *time-exhausting* to write. Then again, literature is also a *wise investment, time-wise*, as the returns on the time invested in reading and writing are simply enormous.

Literature actually manages to halt our secular time. It forces writers and readers alike to stop that time that does not belong to literature — that notion of time that seems to belong, rather, to the digital age, a 24-7-365² notion of time that engulfs us. Literature invites us to let go of the world around us. It allows us to break into the realm of fiction, semi-fiction, auto-fiction, pseudo-fiction, and, somehow, the uncanny reality of the fake-fiction, the false faux, into which our own lives seem to have developed, as strange as it has become to ourselves.

Perhaps, unlike the digital age, literature does not impose itself on us, as it will only offer itself to the extent that it is *desired*. A book will never *force* itself unto anyone, and we, as instructors and facilitators of the usage of words, will never be in a position to compel our students to read or write. There is *agency* in reading. There is seduction and sensuality in reading, and it works both ways. Books will appeal to us if we desire them to do so. Literature must be *genuinely desired* to be read, as it must conversely be desired to be *genuinely read*.

It's *cliché* to say it... but literature functions like a "foreign" language, a language foreign to us, one that we must learn to understand and practice to perform at the highest level. Literature is an idiom to be tamed and disciplined, again and again, learned and relearned, each time we open a book. Many of us teach languages, some more *foreign* than others, as native languages often remain foreign in their subtleties and nuances to many of its speakers. And reading, to me, is always an invitation to relearn one's native tongue. To enter a book for the first time — that *primultimate* time: the last time that it will be the first time³ — getting into a book for the *primultimate* time has everything to do with learning the language of a story *foreign* to us. One needs to get used to the context, to find one's groundings, to become familiar with the place, the folks, the time, the feelings and emotions in an other world, perhaps another other and same at the same time.

Literature is space. Yes, in a global world, it is essential to enter greater spaces through words.

Literature, though, is possibly the best kind of *solitary confinement* known to the “kind-of-human” humankind, for it allows openness to and compassion for the rest of the world without anybody watching. Yet, it requires physical confinement or, at least, isolation from others.

“Teaching literature” is a contradiction in terms

As a professor of literature, then, not-professing-to-profess, however, I mostly facilitate the discussion of literary texts for, and in collaboration with, college students. I teach undergraduate courses, mostly advanced literature seminars in French, mostly first-year seminars in English, mostly texts written in the 20th and the 21st centuries — the 21st century being, of course, my favorite one! — and finally, texts mostly written by women. That’s my calling in my academic life.

I realized some time ago that my first-year students and I had a bit of *un-learning* to do — very little, but some, nonetheless — before being ready truly to embrace literary reading. Indeed, a majority of students appear to come to college with a rather narrow notion of what literature might be — a perception which usually amounts to “great works” or “literary *master-pieces*.” They do not say “produced by *great white and very dead men*,” but that often goes without saying. One of the first questions we raise in class is the very notion that literature — good or bad literature, according to questionable norms — encompasses so much more, indeed. I am myself a bit biased because I concentrate my scholarly efforts on the productions of contemporary women authors writing in French. But I am not narrow-minded, and I strongly encourage my students to read African, African-American, Asian, Latino/Latina authors, and *many* other texts, from *other* places and *other* periods in time. Sometimes, these books tell them stories that resemble them and their own stories; often, these books don’t, and that is even better.

In my advanced classes in French and in my first-year seminars in English, I ask my students to question the *very form of the text* before we even pay attention to whatever its content, its story might be. How are these words coming together on the page, why and how? How is the author literally “*coming to terms*” with any given story? How does the form of the text affect our reading? What *don’t we* understand? What *don’t we* recognize? What *does not* seem to make sense? Are you having difficulty reading this text? How excitingly challenging: you are learning!

I believe that we run a better chance, as facilitators of the literary medium, to sensitize future generations to the importance of *process* over *product* by questioning *form* before *content*. The college undergraduate literature class is a *special place*, a *safe space*, yes, a room of our own, without mouse-clicking and blinking highlights, a communal room for literature to be pro-actively apprehended. It is a space where the digital age should have no place. In my literature classes, students do not open their laptops: they hold paperback or hard-cover books in their hands; they touch and feel literature. There is no room for virtual reality, and plenty for imagination.

If the digital age were to become the poison of our spiritual, emotional and artistic lives on earth, literature and openness to the global world could well be the needed antidote.

Notes

1. I say "most of the time" since our students' all-too-easy access to the internet has created new plagiarism concerns.
2. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty five days a year...
3. I am borrowing the neologism from Vladimir Jankélévitch, who uses in French the adjective "*primultime*" [primultimate] in his essay *La Mort* [Death] (305).

Works Cited

Jankélévitch, Vladimir. *La Mort* [Death]. Paris: Flammarion, 1977.