

# Can Literary Studies be Restored to What they Once were in the University?

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The current parlous situation of the arts and the humanities in most American colleges and universities poses some intricate and interesting problems. On one hand, those who appreciate what education can produce in these fields have to find ways of contesting prevailing attitudes on the part of those who do not share their educational background. On the other hand, those proponents of the arts and humanities have to face the fact that those in control of university resources increasingly think they have to accept the marketplace as an arbiter of competing interests. If one allocates resources in terms of enrollments and degrees, humanistic disciplines are getting exactly what the numbers dictate. Why should idealistic claims about educating the whole person prevail over practical concerns to shorten time in academic pursuits and emphasize skills needed in the marketplace?

Here I can speak only about imaginative writing and the disciplines that constitute the visual arts. I limit myself because I think proponents of education in the arts now have to meet three conditions. First, in literary study at least we have to heed Michael Clune's arguments why current trends of moralizing and politicizing the arts fail to change the situation: they only idealize cognitive goals despite the likelihood that any plausible defense of education in the arts has to articulate competing models of judgment and understanding, ones that are better attuned to essential features of social life and the intricate needs of self-consciousness.<sup>1</sup> Second, resistance to contemporary trends in education has to recuperate the force of the reasons that led universities for centuries to worry not just about numbers but about what valuable interests and practices education might inculcate in students whether or not they know how to participate in what the arts afford. Now it seems bad taste and blind self-interest to make such claims about an education not governed by practical concerns. But there are many ways of being practical—including developing capacities for intricate judgment and passionate appreciation—capacities sustaining values that have been at the center of what liberal education tries to have carry over into adult life.

My third condition involves a more specific obligation on those who want to defend education in the arts. They have to be painfully concrete because they are addressing a mixed audience, many of whom now have not had especially satisfying experiences in aesthetic domains. If there is a new invention in technology, one does not have to understand the process of discovery in order to appreciate and use its results. But the arts are mostly concerned with processes. If one does not know how to experience the mode of inquiry one is left with nothing but boredom. So I begin with boredom as a heuristic: as Alva Noë shows superbly, many well-educated people get bored by serious and much-affirmed works of art.<sup>2</sup> But while Noë is concerned mostly with resisting this boredom by having people attune to the practices involved in art appreciation, I am primarily interested in what this propensity to boredom tells us about American education and American social life. What do people want or demand that they are not getting from the arts?

## I

My answer to my own question is that this boredom stems largely from desiring in aesthetic experience something that the work of art does not provide—like explanations or straightforward descrip-

tions or a movement from premises to conclusions. American education now, like American professional life, is for the most part oriented toward cognitive procedures. The goal of inquiry is to get a sufficiently clear picture of the details that one can test hypothetical generalizations accounting for interrelations among these details and opening paths for further inquiry. Inquirers know how to go from the particular to the general and then use the general as a guide for action. In contrast, most widely respected works of art are not very interesting as either descriptions of states of affairs, or as arguments making judgments about states of affairs. The descriptions are too partial and absorbed in evocations of what seem personal feelings that block objectivity. And the arguments are insufficiently generalized in what seems their painful indirection. Instead of treating details as building to cognitions, the aim of most art is to construct relational fields that thicken the resonances of the particular elements. The arts generalize by developing particulars so they become forceful and exemplary as possible modes of feeling and of thinking.

So how can we formulate what many artists think makes it worth resisting standard cognitive practices in our society. Here I must recuperate arguments that many people think are elitist and formalist. And I do so from a highly privileged position as a white male professor, that generates suspicion – even from me – that I can speak to our political situation. Yet I have to hope even this subject position can profit from these critiques in order to focus on how the arts can influence our approaches to large segments of contemporary experience. For the stakes are higher when we are concerned primarily with university education. Our main task as teachers of literature in the universities is not just to get people to read but to read primarily for why the artistic labors might matter for the kinds of articulation classical and current works can establish for our experiences. So from my perspective it is not sufficient to adapt the pragmatist theory of social value of the arts based on their influence in current discourses developed by Namwalli Serpel. This model just focuses on content in a way that leaves little room for the kind of transformation of habits that I see as the basic goal of literary education. That goal has its own social ambitions that involve seeing how and why artists, current and classic, tend to resist critical discourse emphasizing concerns for knowledge available also in other disciplines. Instead they seek goals involving the intensity, emotional and intellectual depth, and insight carried by the experiencing of the work.

I have for a long time worked with a distinction between “example of” and “example as” in order to distinguish how works of art resist submission to general categories of explanation and yet manage to produce other paths for generalization that depend on achieving distinctive particularity. An “example of” something is an instance of a class. An “example as” something calls attention to a particular that might be significant for the qualities it displays and so worth keeping in memory as possible material for comparisons. Think of the difference between a standard yellow swatch that allows us a color name and a unique shade of yellow that we might think could be useful for touching up an illustration. Now I want to propose a similar distinction between “experience of” and “experience as” in order to bring out the differences in modes of judgment involved in each. These differences in turn involve principles of valuing particular engagements with the world. “Experience of” calls for judgments based on cognitive values: we tend to ask “in what am I engaged and “how do understand what the situation involves for my consequent behavior.” “Experience as” is quite different. Here we encounter experiences that present the moment as an invitation to immersing oneself in its qualities.<sup>3</sup> We care less about determining the truth about what is happening than participating as fully as possible in what is unfolding before us. Seeking explanation might involve shortchanging possible complexities and intricacies of motive for the agents involved. And that would reduce the possibility of fully appreciating why the particulars of the event prove so engaging.

I make this distinction primarily so that we can honor Wittgenstein’s demonstration of how little in our lives is actually driven by concerns for stable knowledge rather than concerns for elaborating what strikes us as interesting in what we encounter. There is also the additional value of recognizing how important for human lives are qualities that we dwell on as conditions of experience. For we

then are likely to see the point of David Chalmers' arguments about the hard problem for the theory of consciousness—which is simply why do analyses based on the pursuit of information ignore the fact that we do not simply process information but we engage in the experiences that convey this information.

I cannot supplement Chalmers' philosophical arguments. But I can show how this interest in the qualities of experience pervades human life and provides one significant ground for developing an interest in the arts. So, now we need to distinguish between two different and interconnected ways of fleshing out what can become manifest in experience. So far we have focused on what we might call the scenic dimension involved in participating imaginatively in how works of art make present aspects of our world. There is also a purposive dimension—a sense that someone is responsible for the shape and intensity of the qualities that we find engaging. That responsibility can be attributed to any agent who wants to make visible what we might call the stager's hand, as in a love note. But the arts have a particular way of calling attention to all that the act of staging can do. We best focus on how artists perform if we attend to how they produce a doubled world. There is an imagined world to be experienced differently. And there are within the unfolding of this world signs that we are invited to participate not only in the event but in the work of staging or realizing what becomes present. Minds become embodied in manifest material events.

Boredom occurs for people trying to engage art works when they do not know how to look for or assess this doubling. Conversely, demonstrating how to gain access to possible values involved in such doubling is precisely what university education can afford—both in terms of illustrating what to look for and dramatizing the effects of the making. Such affordance then promises to make intelligible an entire domain of imaginative activities, that have been central in the culture and can be central again – if people can learn how to identify with the intelligence responsible, for how works of art come to constitute intensified versions of experiencing distinctive states of sensibility.<sup>4</sup>

I will soon rely on particulars in order to demonstrate the delight and power of imaginative doubling. But first I want to provide two touchstones for the process involved. The first is philosophical. Imagine how we might adapt Wittgenstein's contrast between "Red." and "Red!" "Red." offers a description. "Red!" expresses states like surprise or wonder. What makes this shift in value possible? Perhaps the significance of this contrast is sharpest when we bring in Heidegger's distinction between the "is" of description and the "is" of what he calls "self-blossoming emergence." Second, in order to show how such concerns are central to the experience of art we can follow Paul Cézanne's account of restructuring particulars in order to create a doubled space where imagination becomes "realization." He argues that his pictures are neither descriptive representations of scenes nor personal expressions about feelings those scenes elicit. Rather his ambition is to present "pictures which will be an education" by means of their devotion "entirely to the study of nature" (letter May 12, 1904, ATM, 34). The process of realization involves making visible the deep satisfaction located in activating the care and skill that imagination can bring. For it transforms what is observed into a manifestation of the forces that make it an adventure for the eye. Then the painter produces not only a truth within nature but an activity of giving the artist's "entire personality, whether great or small" (Ibid).<sup>5</sup> The gift is something close to a wedding between the will needing to affirm its own activity and a world that yields its nature to such activity. Doubling will and world produces a complex and active singularity.

## II

Now we need to see concretely how the maker's will and the experience rendered constitute a doubling that weaves the object in the subject and the subject in the object as conditions of experience. And perhaps only then can we have a clear picture of why art is so difficult to teach to audiences limited by a devotion to practical cognition. By stressing imaginative doubling we enable orientations in and to the world, in ways that do not idealize knowing that something is the case but instead rely on knowing how to reflect on, and attend to, what engages our attention.<sup>6</sup> And we demonstrate the

cost of what Wittgenstein called “aspect blindness,” the narrowing of interest to one practical concern that occludes attention to what we might see displayed in how the phenomenon takes on presence.

My first example comes from Modernist visual art because this work typically emphasized alternatives to any kind of straightforward description serving cognitive ends. Imagine you are encountering at MOMA a canvas by Kasimir Malevich: you see a creamy white background, a rather large black square parallel to the picture frame and in the lower right of the painting a much smaller tilted red square.<sup>7</sup> The sensual details are blunt and obvious. The shapes are too simple and painfully direct to constitute any kind of decorative design. And there is clearly no overt argument or narrative. So we have to imagine what the maker might convey and embody as reasons for making this presentation. There has to be some other world hovering within the relations among these details. Engaging this painting requires entering the doubled world necessary for understanding why the surface is so plain or, better, so elemental. One way of entering is to ask how both the visible shapes are related to each other and to the creamy off-white background. Notice for example how the background would alter, along with the feelings involved, if the red square were simply beneath the black square without this tilt. When I first spoke about this painting one audience member, the son of a very famous father, answered this question by suggesting that then the father would be suffocating the son. It does not take this level of melodrama to see the tilt as involving some kind of active differing from the authority of the black square. In fact, Malevich said red was the color of revolution. But I want to concentrate on more intimate and more realistic properties of this tilt. Notice that this tilt has an important material effect on the background. For its action stresses the power of differences. And one aspect of that power is that the painting containing the differences then becomes more active—not just a container but now as a comprehensive force capable of setting forth and containing these oppositions.

Then there is the tilt itself. It does suggest the value and power for imagining breaking from oppressive authority. But for me, there is a more important intimate aspect of the tilt, that embodies how subjective interests break from their conventional backgrounds. The painting contains two contrary pulls—toward order and toward the assertion of difference—so that each becomes a more powerful pull on a responding sensibility. Such forces probably even invoke, and exemplify, self-consciousness about Suprematism’s efforts to break from representational painting. And this is not yet the most fundamental power exemplified by this self-consciousness inseparable from an elemental sensuous existence. I now think that this red tilt virtually defines what is involved in being a subject who feels physically and psychologically an involvement in distinctive individual projects. We see in the painting a proleptic effort to locate psychology in the material world rather than in pure inwardness. When we attribute imaginative life to painting, we put ourselves in position to provide a sensuous analogue both for the viewer’s sense of attaining some kind of individuality and the painting’s appreciation of what this tilt has done to the history of art.

I want a second example that is not modern, yet perfectly attuned to how doubling in art can embody elemental but intricate demands on self-consciousness. So I will emphasize the power of a very simple move in William Blake’s “The Sick Rose.” Notice how a simple metrical shift in the sixth and seventh lines give a physical base for the combination of terror and pleasure that the poem asserts. This is no longer mere assertion. The text embodies an action that takes on significance as a feature of what the poem is asserting. And by this metrical shift tone becomes substantially more complex:

O Rose thou art sick.  
 The invisible worm,  
 That flies in the night  
 In the howling storm:  
  
 Has found out thy bed  
 Of crimson joy:  
 And his dark secret love  
 Does thy life destroy.

As we ask what kind of information this text provides, please look carefully at how the tone of the speaking invites interpretive speculation. And notice how the text utilizes the physicality of meter as its insistence on a sensuous dimension that remains inseparable from how the imagination is invited to process the experience. The first feature of tone is the surprising fact that there is so little description of this rose. The interest of the speaker clearly lies elsewhere: from the start the poem offers an apostrophe directly addressing the rose rather than maintaining a distance that would allow description. The focus is on feeling, mostly as an effort to identify with the worm's point of view. Clearly there is a sense of horror at this destruction. But there is also another pronounced process of identifying with the worm as it exercises the power of its given nature. Perhaps the best way of summarizing this tone is to see it as an act of chilling admiration—as if beauty had to learn to take pleasure in the destructive forces it inspires. We cannot experience the fullness of this speaking without attending to this disturbing play of appreciation and pleasure in destruction.

The primary role of the meter is to capture and help interpret this complexity of feeling. Most of the poem offers five syllable lines with one anapest and one iamb. But everything changes in the sixth and seventh lines. The sixth line has only four syllables: “of crimson joy” presents a very concise statement of what becomes the worm's target. Then the seventh line has six syllables, suggesting the power of the worm to violate the space of that joy. The added syllable embodies both the worm's force and its expansive self-delight in taking over any possible self-delight for the rose itself. This in turn sets the context for the intense finality of the concluding line “Does thy life destroy.” Here rhythm again doubles the force of assertion because there is sense that each syllable can be stressed. The power of this perverse love here then becomes completely at one with the change in pace of diction and meter. Now the poem turns to a kind of hovering over detail that intensifies the pleasure in this undoing of everything we desire from the rose. Perhaps we have to identify with the worm's pleasure because its power for destruction is likely to prove more enduring than anything beauty can establish: fascination with the worm transforms even the inner life how the speaker formulates the movement of description. This is doubling with a vengeance.

### III

There are three basic theoretical dimensions to the concept of doubling—one concerning how it dramatizes basic features of aesthetic experience, one enabling us to characterize what powers the works make available to audiences, and one proposing to treat the powers involved in doubling as potentially substantial social supplements to the modern world's reliance on the kinds of epistemic activity that are valued by those concerned primarily with various market-place conditions.

The primary force of realization depends on the effort to participate imaginatively in what artists and writers are doing with their media. As we have just seen, such works virtually demand keeping our awareness focused on everything that resists offering clear description or argument. Then we can begin to concentrate on what happens to our sensibility as we speculate on why the artists develop specific interrelations based on elements like meter and tone, or contrasting shapes. My second concern follows logically. Our focus on the content of the work is mediated by our focus on these acts of participation. In order to participate fully we virtually have to ask why it might matter to see aspects of the world from the perspective in which we try to participate. Then we can understand why many theorists claim that aesthetic sensibility cultivates significant powers for engaging in social life. We have to hear shifts in tone and adjust our interpretive frameworks for such tones. And we have to attend carefully to the details of another's labors because their interrelationship becomes a crucial dimension of the work's emerging for consciousness. Only then do we fully recognize what being an active member of an audience entails.<sup>8</sup>

This last observation highlights significant social powers that are crucial to education. First our basic aim in reading and in looking is appreciating something we cannot possess but only identify

with in its ways of constituting experience. We have to seek a version of identify for ourselves within the parameters of attending to how the artist proceeds. This identify will involve feeling one's own active capacity for such empathy as a mode of pleasure as well as a significant power to share in how other people construct experience. So empathy typically fuses with this enhanced self-consciousness. In this respect an example from Max Scheler stands out. He offers a contrast between situations where finite resources must be divided, so, that the more people involved, the smaller the individual shares from any material object become – and situations like performances of a symphony, where it is feasible to imagine that the larger the audience, the greater becomes the capacity for joy. Because each individual can identify one's own joy with the joy of others.<sup>9</sup> And even when the audience is only a person reading, there can be constant awareness that other people are reading the same work with perhaps the same emotional engagements. Of course, emotional responses may also differ. But in the domain of art projecting these possible differences can also be a useful, probably crucial exercise in imagining how one might sympathize with a variety of modes of response.

I cannot leave the topic of audiencing without another observation. I want to call attention to one dimension of self-consciousness in responding to the arts by invoking Kant's distinction between liking a work and judging a work to be beautiful. In our intellectual culture we might want to stress other forms of judgment and weaken Kant's claims for universals. But the same distinction holds. Judging work entails postulating a general standard and assuming others can rationally discuss the particular claims. Teaching in the arts is not just a matter of sharing likes and dislikes. Rather it involves an act of faith that aesthetic experience is a primary location for feeling intensely a subjectivity that is not complete without seeking the agreement of other people. The seeking itself constitutes a potentially significant sense of involvement with a public more expansive than an ideologically consistent community. And when we make such judgments we put ourselves in the position of an appreciator—that is one who sees the good in how the made object deals with experience. Such an achievement seems a minor value given all the urgent problems heaped upon us by social realities. But if you consider that appreciation is in most registers incompatible with resentment, then dispositions oriented toward appreciation can be seen as capable of significant interventions in a world increasingly shaped by emotional violence towards anything that might be seen as threatening to self-interest.

#### IV

I conclude with another short poem dramatizing what the work doubling can do in order to intensify and to complicate this Kantian sense of how reading involves awareness of other people as cooperating agents. This development should make clearer how education in the arts is in the interests of most students because the focus is on developing distinctive attitudes inviting complex attention to particular states of mind while also fostering sensibilities involved in thinking through the affective dimensions of volatile social situations.

This is Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem":

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore—  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over—  
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

*Or does it explode?*

Hughes's poem is obviously political. But its major point is not to make an argument or express a feeling but to create a particular object that embodies a condition of feeling and thinking about feeling. Doubling here occurs in three basic ways. First, it matters a great deal that the poem is about the dream, rather than about dreamers. For it posits a collective entity that people might attach to, but do not control. And it opens the space for a level of existence that can be pervasive without quite being visible or controllable. It is not a huge generalization that politics has to deal with the dreamers, while art can try to make visible and concrete the conditions of a shared dream. Then it can try to imagine conditions of agency that are themselves appropriate to this collective entity. Second, the focus on the dream is accompanied by an intricate overlay of questions. Literally there is an overarching question that generates a series of more particular questions. But a central feature of the doubling is that there is an even more basic question: to whom is the poem speaking. So issues of agency frame the series of specific questions—why these similes and to what do they add up. Finally, there is a huge shift to a rhymed couplet at the end.

How does the poem change because of that shift to a directness of expression for which no simile can be adequate. The stanza responding to the opening question seems to evade the issue it poses by offering several inquiries with corresponding similes that introduce a range of possible affective states. The first and the fourth similes raise the possibility that the deferred dream will simply get absorbed into the textures of daily life. But the similes lying between those propose a quite different temporality. “Festering like a sore” and “smelling like rotten meat” present conditions without temporal frameworks. Something must be done. But as yet there is no promise of a mode of agency to turn the feelings of deep dissatisfaction into any kind of action.

It is in the concluding lines that the poem becomes most direct. The final simile, “maybe it just sags/ like a heavy load” seems the simplest and least destructive, although that load disrupts any likely progress and intensifies frustration with the situation. The final rhyme considerably intensifies the likely result of this deferral. Imminent violence seems embedded in the situation. Yet no revolutionary agent appears. There is obviously no hope for one. But there also emerges the likelihood that there is no need for one. Instead there is a growing and disabling frustration that affects the entire populace. The agency will be collective. And here the one couplet in the poem, a very strong one, does considerable work in establishing what seems the inevitability of this explosion, without modifiers that might suggest any human control. The poem makes no judgments about behavior, only about social conditions that produce despair by cancelling every source of hope in anything other than necessity. That necessity is blind, caring only about relief from painful frustration, without any concern for what happens in the future. This rhyme insists that concerns for the future might have to give away to what seems by the end the only alternative to that “heavy load.” And that alternative belies all the dithering of similes and the effort to invoke lyric devices to handle historical tragedy.

I am tempted to characterize this poem as shaping an attitude of revolutionary despair because the collective frustration seems the only effective form of agency. Such a condition ironically demands this brevity and lack of any concern for persons who might provide complex judgments. But even if I do not get the tone quite right, I have to ask where this final couplet leaves readers, black and white? Answering this question requires returning to the choice to have the poem concentrate on the dream, rather than on the dreamers. This shift in focus might afford a level of objectivity on which people might agree on how much harm deferring this dream might produce for the social order. Of course, Harlem will suffer the most: that is the cost of its populace being so badly treated that they need the dream in the first place. And almost all white readers can only make gestures toward sympathizing with conditions they cannot know directly—both with regard to what causes the deferred dream and what the explosion will cost. But each group might better understand the other, because Hughes has captured the situation in such intimate and complex terms that avoid subjective differences. And that consequential avoidance might even produce an intelligible and shared anger at abdications of responsibility basic to American politics. Choices about linguistic presentation can matter in many dimensions of experience.

## V

I think everything I have been saying is either explicit or clearly implicit in Hegel's aesthetic theory. I have evaded any claims about Hegel so far because I do not want to confuse my educational proposals with any kind of abstract metaphysical or historical concerns. But before I close I should make these affinities clear because Hegel is a lot more forceful than I am in clarifying how the arts matter for cultural life. Here I will just stress two features of Hegel on art. The first is the importance of treating the arts as vehicles whereby spirit finds fulfillment in taking sensuous forms that open into an inner life embodying imaginative energies. Hegel is the great theorist of doubling even though he does not emphasize the term.<sup>10</sup> The second is the dialectical model by which that doubling affords a new content to be discovered by consciousness eager to adapt the experience to its understanding of its own historical situation. That is, Hegel clarifies the ultimate goal of teaching in the arts by his idealizations of self-consciousness. The work of spirit—I prefer to say imaginative intensity—presents the possibility of new subject positions, capable of understanding and appreciating how aspects of the world get transformed and grasped as significant experience. The new subject position allows agents to understand themselves as objects of historical forces and yet take responsibility for such situations by expanding how they imagine what subjectivity can become.

We first have to recognize that perhaps because Hegel is so abstract, he has a powerful compensatory commitment to the sensuousness of art as spirit's means of expressing itself:

These sensuous shapes and sounds appear in art not merely for themselves and their immediate shape, but with the aim, in this shape, of affording satisfaction to higher spiritual interests, since they have the power to call forth from all the depths of consciousness a sound and an echo in the spirit. In this way the sensuous aspect of art is spiritualized, since the spirit appears in art as made sensuous. (LFA 39)<sup>11</sup>

And that emphasis on sensuous concreteness requires a distinctive form of judgment open to how doubling works. We have to understand how the sensuous can implicate the domain of meaning. The key is to appreciate how the concrete work invites mind to inhabit the substantial features of what is expressed in the work. Judgment then becomes the analysis of how connection is constituted and why that specific constitution might matter for the states of self-consciousness that the work of art can elicit. Art therefore is opposed to philosophy, which seeks to absorb that sensuous world within conceptual structures. Art offers imaginatively animated particulars rather than concepts.

Then, second, we have to draw tight links between judgment of the work and the nature of the dynamic self-consciousness that it elicits and rewards. This is where Hegel's greatest contribution to aesthetic education lies—in his sense of why it matters to engage the expressive processes elaborated in the arts. Expression is pressing out of significance based on passionate engagements in situations. But for Hegel there are always two sources—how the subject feels and how that feeling might be anchored in the specific way that imagination inhabits the world. Romantic thinking emphasizes the subjective feeling as transforming the object. Hegelian thinking emphasizes the ways that subjective feeling can sponsor reflection in how it is anchored in what imagination produces in sensuous form.<sup>12</sup> Aesthetic judgment affords a site where “the thinking spirit” can know itself again after “it has surrendered its proper form to feeling and sense, to comprehend itself in its opposite” (LFA p. 13.).

Thus for Hegel the focus of the philosophy of art shifts from demands for explanation to a willingness to engage the kind of thinking that involves “reflection on the mode of its productivity and practice” (LA p. 27). Art is the way humans bring the self before itself “by *practical* activity” enabling a person to alter “external things whereon he impresses the seal of his own inner being.” That positioning makes “spiritual inspiration conspicuous” (LA 29) by concentrating on how self-consciousness of one's powers as spirit becomes possible through acts of engaging sensuous particulars: “Only by this active placing of himself before himself” does a person make visible the quality of spirit's engagement with the world (LFA 31).<sup>13</sup>

All this talk of self-consciousness would be mere self-absorption if Hegel did not perform the crucial task of defining positive cultural roles for that process because of its functioning within what

we might call “the dialectics of everyday life.” All of my speculation is an effort to come to terms with this remarkable passage from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

Only after it has externalized this individuality in the sphere of culture, thereby giving it existence, and establishing it through the whole of existence ...only then does it turn the thought of its inmost depths outward and enunciate essence as ‘I’ = ‘I’. ... In other words, the ‘I is not merely the Self, but *the identity of the self with itself*; but this identity is complete and immediate oneness with Self, or this Subject is just as much Substance.<sup>14</sup>

On the left side of the equation is the work of the self-conscious effort to express how it engages certain features of experience in order to feel itself fully engaged in a given situation. The right side of the equation involves how history and the force of situations define what demands expression by the subjective “I.” Neither side of the equation involves fixed entities.

Rather both sides are continually adjusting their responses to what the other seems to demand. Take for example how the situation on the right side of the equation can challenge the subjective side by revealing aspects of the world that actually negate how the psychological subject establishes identity for itself. That side of the equation is a version of Emerson’s Nature as the not me. So the situation on the right side of the equation can complicate the subjective side, by revealing aspects of the world that challenge how the subject pole establishes identity for itself.

Probably the clearest general account of this dialectical principle occurs when Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* develops his criticism of empiricist idealizations of the “here” and the “now” because he thinks both terms are empty without the elaboration of contexts.<sup>15</sup> Suppose the “here” before consciousness appears to be a straightforward scene of an apparently idyllic landscape. Then the left side of the equation needs only relatively simple judgment taking direct pleasure in what is before the eye. But the situation can change, for example when the ‘I’ becomes suspicious of that ease, as if it began to fear that it was ignoring potentially disturbing aspects of the scene. Danger may be lurking in what seems innocent. Or an element of the scene may emerge that reminds one of how the scene implicates a history of injustice. Such suspicions negate the way the subject initially appropriates the scene as a source of innocent pleasures. Once uneasiness arises, the agent will have to call upon capacities for complexity of feeling and intellectual judgment concerning historical forces in order to respond dialectically to this negation. A new subject position must be constructed. The agent would have to question any direct identifications with the characters in the scenes insofar as these identifications might factor in that unease.

So the agent would have to become self-reflexively critical of its earlier emotional investments. For example, the shaping imagination in art can cultivate various kinds of impersonality that are not opposed to the subjective but present ways of seeing what subjects can share and the powers that accrue to that sharing.<sup>16</sup> We have to appreciate how the dialectical process affords a great deal of flexibility in our imagining subjective agency. The psychological person is central early in my narrative of the pastoral idyll. But as the situation takes on multiple dimensions, the subjective pole has to expand in accord with what is being registered. The earlier investments have to be negated, and that fact of negation has to become a basic aspect of the objectivity of the scene.

Hence the subject has to find ways of re-thinking and re-feeling if it is to take responsibility for having the experience of how the objective situation has changed, and is changing her. Eventually the subject cannot feel adequate to the emerging object before her unless she tries to develop a stance for feeling and for thinking that engage what now seems the actual objective world. As substance gets more complicated the subject position has to become more inclusive as a site for shared feelings evoked by the new situation. Ultimately Hegel can construct an Absolute because if the subject’s position can become truly philosophical, it eventually can merge with a true account of what comprises the real where subjective intensities and objective conditions merge completely, bringing an end to the inadequacies of merely historical understanding.

## VI

These are portentous claims. But here I am less interested in their truth than in the way they focus attention on certain aspects of reading, especially the role of self-consciously watching who one becomes in the reading. Let me then close by returning to Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem," with a focus on how readers are invited to see themselves positioned and re-positioned. It goes without saying that I imagine the primary role of teaching literature as stressing how such positioning can make readers aware of the force by which imagination might function in the real world.

The poem initially proposes several possible subject positions, all of which present weak fantasies of how natural forces might eliminate the dreaming of change, that makes life in Harlem continually oppressive. The various initial scenarios seem sheer wishes that something might happen despite paralyzed human agents. There is no subject position invoked that might produce the desired change. That lack of forceful subject positions is also evident in how "explode" emerges as a surprising, but causally intricate rhyme with "load." Is this just another fantasy without the support of human agency? Or is this an evocation of something more grand and more positive than anything which human agents could deliberately construct? In this second case, keeping Hegel in mind, we might ask if we can reconstitute that lack of responsibility as a dialectical feature of the imagined situation. Perhaps the lack of subject positions is less a failure of agency, than a setting the scene for a recognition that other factors, more powerful than human ones, will be necessary for any change to occur.

The lack of subject position could be only wistful, a vague sense of hopelessness. But that lack becomes much more ominous because of the conclusion. The possibility of explosion also bypasses human agency. But now that bypassing is a yielding to more powerful factors, rather than wishful fantasies of simple transformation. We are asked to recognize that while the conditions in Harlem were created by human agents, the situation (or substance) seems to have taken on a life of its own – that will be responsive only to modes of absolute force beyond the capacities of human planning. Hughes's version of "I = I" in fact requires several transformations of agency: the desire to avoid human agency becomes in fact a precise account of what humans cannot do on their own to change what they have made as history, and the explosion would become a measure of what might eventually make other forms of human agency possible.

Then those who can occupy the implied subject position of the "I," which history makes much more capacious than the state of individual egos, now have to see that this new "I" is inseparable from the substance of historical circumstance. The effort to escape human agency ends up in the forced observation that the subject position humans choose must admit its having become abject and useless. But this discovery seen in a Hegelian light allows for the reworking of failure into the capacity to identify collectively with this non-human hope for explosion. Like the slave who in the Phenomenology gets defeated by the master, defeat blocks any hope for power as an isolated subject. But it opens one to the force of joining in communal efforts to bring new order to nature. Here the communal factor is limited to hope, but given the realities of the situation it might be the failures of human agency that in fact produce communal awareness of what may be necessary. Neglect too, can transform what we have to realize about the substance of history.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Defenses of literary education are in fashion now, as they should be given how most universities are treating the teaching of all of the humanities. But following the fashion will do more harm than good if the defenses are based on little more than injured pride and resistance to the triumph of STEM disciplines. This is why I try to distinguish aspects of experience that require or at least reward an emphasis on display and affective engagement rather than efforts to demonstrate how objects not intended to provide any kind of knowledge in fact do serve cognitive interests. Given my concern for alternatives to cognitive goals for literary study, I have to begin by repudiating three kinds of discourses about the need for literary and arts education in University education. The first is intelligently represented by Michael Clune's *Defense of Judgment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021). Clune is an acute critic of the attempts by literary critics to dignify their practices by focusing on the moral judgments the study of literature can sustain. He insists that such judgments depend on a universalizing process not compatible with the tendency in most important literary works to elaborate particular situations in order to stress their distinctiveness. So he tried instead to reconstruct aesthetic judgment so that it can stress how cognitive interests in forms of knowledge are fostered in these developments of particular situations. But from my perspective literary education should be concerned with knowledge only in relation to cultural practices and historical situations pertaining to texts. Concerns for the particularity of texts simply cannot live up to the standards for what counts as actionable knowledge provided by the sciences. There will be inevitable tensions between the emotions activated by the rendering of particulars and the kinds of generalization that support significant claims to knowledge. I try to elaborate this concern for particularity in this chapter and I feel confident in aligning with the general criticism of Clune along these lines by Joshua Adams's review essay "Ideas as Aesthetics: On Michael W. Clune's *A Defense of Judgment*," *Chicago Review*, 2021.

The second problem is represented by two defenses of the place of great books in general education by Roosevelt Montas, *Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed my Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation* (Princeton, 2021) and Arnold Weinstein, *The Lives of Literature: Reading, Teaching, Knowing*. These books rely on testimonial evidence and the pursuit of noble ideals while dismissing literary and aesthetic theory as destructive postmodern invasions of the sacred space created by an individual's pursuit of self-knowledge by means of reading the great books. Dismissing all theory because some theory allies with cultural criticism and skepticism about the pursuit of traditional values leaves only personal testimony for how these books cultivate self-knowledge. Some attention to theory might help clarify the grounds for these knowledge claims and elicit some shame at using the self as exemplary object of analysis for idealizations of what the teacher can produce.

The final problematic discourse is the most disturbing of all. I have only one example but I suspect that its attitudes will prevail in an increasingly cynical literary academy. I refer to Louis Menand's review of these two books "Too Good for this World" in *The New Yorker* Dec 20, 2021: 64–68. Menand stages a distanced authorial position somewhere between contempt and ironic bemusement. For him claims about the great books as vehicles for self-knowledge simply evade the evidence of cultural change that seems to proclaim an inevitable decline in the importance of literary education. Bolstered by how easily these books fail to offer any kind of reasoned defense, Menand comes to identify entirely with the social sciences. I cannot resist citing a sentence near the triumphant close of his argument that "education is about empowering people to deal with things as they are" (68). Before turning to this sentence, it will help if we recognize how the claim to capture "Things as they are" is as vague as claims that great books produce a distinctive self-knowledge. Why cannot "things as they are" include labors for improvement of our basic educational practices. Menand's adamant refusal to be seduced by literary illusion evading things as they are then produces this surprising assertion: "The idea that students develop a greater capacity for empathy by reading books in literature classes about people who never existed than they can by taking classes in fields that study actual human behavior does not make a lot of sense" (68). "Exist" is a funny word here because some individuals in literature, like Woolf's Mrs. Ramsey or Ellison's invisible man become more real for many than living people can be because they are articulated with such strong individuality. But then someone who prefers the generalizations about types of behavior that is the ordinary fare of psychology classes may be willfully blind to the force of such individuals. He seems to prefer generalizations about real behavior so that he can remain in the world of typical behaviors. But can a literary critic stay there. His most realistic gesture becomes also apparently his deepest illusion. Not content with his impersonal distance, Menand concludes with what he thinks is a clinching personal assertion. He teaches the great books and has learned a lot from them from when he was

seventeen, but “I don’t think I am a better person.” But he also seems to ignore the fact that his tone and his lapses in logic may indicate how much better a person he needs to be.

<sup>2</sup> Noe, *Strange Tools*. Hill and Wang 2015.

<sup>3</sup> In the case of “example of,” the particular example is explained by the category: the case is an instance of a class. But in the case of “example as,” the particular example becomes the category. In the first case Hamlet can illustrate Renaissance understandings of melancholy or Invisible Man can illustrate the effects of racial prejudice. In the second case Hamlet becomes a figure inviting us to identify with his confusions and the invisible man dramatizes a version of finding oneself trapped in destructive self-consciousness. I elaborate the theoretical issues in working with this distinction in my work: *Reckoning with the Imagination: Wittgenstein and the Aesthetics of Literary Experience*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> There is a long standing critique in aesthetic theory of the primacy of practical modes of judgment when other modes of reflection seem capable of fuller engagement with particular experiences.

1) Practical judgment has to choose consistency of aspect and so must carve paths of analysis that are aspect blind. Practical judgment must seek clear pictures and most often sacrifice complexity for generality or universality. Reducing situations to statistical probabilities is one extreme example.

2) Practical judgement goes astray when it gets fascinated by particulars—say the changing face of a beloved or the ways connotations haunt denotations.

3) Much art requires a sensibility that involves seeing into particulars rather than assessing them in categorical terms. The strongest statement of this involves a kind of double vision and a demand for constantly switching between the material and the figurative or implicational as the means for processing how objects can appeal to evaluation or involvement. Such seeing in (or seeing as in order to see in) can build intensities and develop corresponding sympathies as we come to see in the particular the need to resolve forces within its ways of manifesting itself that are in tension or states of confusion.

On “seeing in” see Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*.

<sup>5</sup> For Wallace Stevens on “realization” see *Stevens Collected Poetry and Prose*. Library of America, 1997. And for the relation of W.C. Williams to Cézanne’s principles see my essay “Ponderation in Cezanne and Williams.”

<sup>6</sup> This exploration will eventually lead me to engage William James and F.H. Bradley on the concept of experience, to characterize social relations established when we engage purposive objects where attunement becomes more important than cognition, and to speculate on how our examples help us appreciate certain dimensions of the claims by Nietzsche and Wittgenstein that aesthetics and ethics are one. To the extent that the pursuit of psychological states in which we can find satisfaction is important for the question why be ethical at all, aesthetic experience is crucial in fostering desires inseparable from ethical decision making.

<sup>7</sup> I hold back the title for an endnote because I think *Boy with a Knapsack* is probably a joke that adds a level of irony to the painting. An observer unfamiliar with modern art might just try to see the image as a boy in red bent over by trying to carry the heavy black knapsack. The irony then is that the painting’s effort to double the marks usually deployed for description can itself produce audience efforts to transform the new into the old. The old title was *Suprematist Composition; Red Square and Black Square*.

<sup>8</sup> This is the best critical statement I know celebrating the powers invoked by what realization can do in art: “What is prehensile is what is able to grasp, take hold of, and by extension grasp sensitively, intimately in the sense of closely, like the monkey’s tail on the branch, or the fingers on the ladder rung when the foot slips. As applied to the imagination then, the prehensile quality is the quality of being in direct, absolute, and undifferentiated contact with the substance of interest. It can be thought of at one end as the quality of raw experience and at the other end as the sphinx quality of experience. It may be either pure response or pure knowledge. Either aspect of such experience is common in actual life, focal in religious life, and the central object in works of imagination. It is the doorknob held or turned; it is the quality of experience which comes with unmitigated attention. Unmitigated attention may be easy in the bloodstream, in love, before the face looking in the window; but in the life of the mind it is the hardest condition to come by. In one respect it is a freed condition secured by absolute surrender of the will; and in another respect it is an imprisoned condition imposed by the utter absorption of the will. The point is that all that is intermediate in the ordinary run of things is made immediate; which is what we mean when we say that breathing becomes breathless, hope becomes terror, or time stands still, but without any cessation, in any of these cases, of life, faith, or motion, and with an excess of inward, of mutual verisimilitude. That – the heightened sense of being, of self-proving identity, of the authority of experience – that is what the prehensile imagination grasps.” (R.P Blackmur. “Afterward,” *The Spoils of Poynton*, New Directions, p. 229.)

<sup>9</sup> Max Scheler. *On Feeling, Knowing, and Valuing*.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Hegel's *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, translated by T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), vol 1, p, 36 ;The mode of spiritual apprehension affords objectivity for inner being, which makes "an abstraction" out of "something sensually concrete" in order to produce "something essentially other than what that same object was in its sensuous appearance." Or consider how Hegel posits the realm of aesthetic judgment as one where "the thinking spirit" can know itself again "when it has surrendered its proper form to feeling and sense, to comprehend itself in its opposite" (LFA 13).

<sup>11</sup> See also LFA 35: "The work of art, as a sensuous object, is not merely for sensuous apprehension; it's standing is of such a kind, that, although sensuous, it is essentially at the same time for spiritual apprehension; the spirit is meant to be affected by it and to find some satisfaction in it.

<sup>12</sup> This sense of spirit defined in terms of self-consciousness is at the core of Charles Taylor's elaborate and engaging treatment of the concept of expression in his *Hegel*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). Because the concept is so central here I want my readers to have one of Hegel's precise formulations: Things in nature are only immediate and single, while man as spirit duplicates himself, in that 1) he is as things in nature are, but 2) he is just as much for himself; he sees himself, represents himself to himself, thinks, and only on the basis of this active placing himself before himself is he spirit" (LFA 31).

<sup>13</sup> I cannot resist citing another passage where Hegel is explicit on the relation of poetry to self-consciousness: The chief task of poetry is to bring before our minds that power governing spiritual life, and in short, all that surges to and fro in human passion and feeling or passes quietly through our meditation ... [A person] must know what the powers are which drive and direct him, and it is such a knowledge that poetry provides in its original and substantive form. (LFA 973)

<sup>14</sup> Hegel, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 489 par 803. See also in PS, pp 408–9, par 671), and pp. 490–91, pars 804–805. And in LFA see 92–93 and in volume II all of Section III of Part III.

<sup>15</sup> PS, the Chapter on "Observing Reason" and the pages leading up to it—131–210.

<sup>16</sup> In elaborating these claims I will be resisting the tendency of critics like Maud Ellman, *The Poetics of Impersonality: T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound* to see impersonality as a sign of defensiveness unwilling to risk personal honesty. In my view contemporary emphases on impersonality as self-protectiveness simply refuse to attend to the possibility that impersonality can offer ways of treating subjectivity that stress the inadequacy of the personal while also defining modes of self-consciousness that in fact often liberate us from ourselves.

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