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ARTICLE

Can Literature Really Make a Difference? Toward a *Chastened* View of the Role of Fiction in Democratic Education

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The role of literature in democratic education has always been a subject of paramount importance to Maxine Greene. Sprinkled throughout her work are thoughtful accounts of the myriad ways that the reading of fiction can significantly contribute to an understanding of what it means to teach and learn. She has continually insisted that thoughtful engagements with poetry and prose can offer new perspectives from which to see, and thereby potentially remake, the world. Even while insisting that the embracing of complexity and possibility is central to such an aesthetic reading practice, she has never wavered in her deeply felt conviction that it can profitably enhance both the personal attempt to fashion meaning, and the related social experience of shared democratic life. In her first book, an edited collection of essays on existentialism that she selected for their potential value to teachers, Greene (1967) could not resist slipping in a line about one of her favorite authors at the time, Ralph Ellison. While discussing the potential dangers of reductive categories of thinking, she makes the point that “to identify an individual by means of a category (‘Negro,’ ‘disadvantaged,’ ‘upper class’) is to give a certain amount of information; but it makes the individual, *qua* individual, ‘invisible’—to use Ralph Ellison’s term” (p. 7). In all her books that followed, Greene would help deepen our understanding of how the reading of literature might help people become more *visible* to each other, and why as a pedagogical goal this is so vital to the maintenance and expansion of democracy.

In her very next effort, for example, *Teacher as Stranger: Educational Philosophy for the Modern Age* (1973), she says right up front that “the interest dominating this book is in the possibility of arousing individuals to wide-awakeness” (p. 6). Grounded in a combination of awareness and reflection, “wide-awakeness” achieves its greatest potential, Greene continues, when readers focus on “their own commitments and actions wherever they work and make their lives” (p. 6). Citing Joseph Conrad’s claim that the purpose of the arts is nothing less than “to make people see” (p. 16), she insists that forging relationships with “realms of *imaginative* possibility” (emphasis Greene, p. 16) are essential to this project, since they have such tremendous potential to “heighten perceptiveness and sensitivity” (p. 291).

To help her readers maintain such an intense relationship with literature, Greene (1978) would offer in her next book a couple of important suggestions. She reminds her readers that they should begin where they are in the moment with their own local and even personal concerns, with what she now calls their “landscapes,” since “persons are more likely to ask their own questions and seek their own transcendence when they feel themselves to be grounded in their personal histories, their lived lives” (p. 2). She also describes those writers who best speak to our “landscapes” as “adversary artists,” the greatest gift they offer their readers being the opportunity “to find ourselves breaking with submergence, posing our own critical questions to reality” (p. 38). Almost two decades later, Greene (1995) was still making her case that it is essential to take imaginative writing seriously. “One of the reasons I have come to concentrate on imagination as a means through which we can assemble a coherent world,” she writes, “is that imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible” (p. 3). And, of course, for Greene it is precisely this *empathy* that can inform what she calls “the capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society” (p. 5).

I must confess that I find this expansive role for reading literature in democratic education not only poignant, but also fundamentally correct. I am convinced of the fundamental soundness of this view not only on a theoretical level, but also because it so directly resonates with my own lived experience. In my teaching, both in high schools with adolescents, and now with teacher candidates in a university

program, I have witnessed the tremendous impact that fiction can have on the learning of my students. Most recently, for example, in my “Models of Education” classes over the past few years, I have been assigning May Sarton’s novel *The Small Room* (1961), the plot of which revolves around the experience of a new teacher, Lucy Winter. Her existential dilemma begins when she discovers that Jane, an exceptional student, who is admired by her teachers as much as she is envied by her classmates, has plagiarized an essay. Jane’s mentor, Carryl Cope, a brilliant and excessively demanding teacher, argues that for the sake of Jane’s future, she and Lucy should suppress the incident and deal with it quietly. Winter is thereby abruptly confronted with some of the most challenging themes that so many teachers face on a regular basis – the importance of academic honesty, sensitivity to the needs of others, and the real value of an education. As the plot unfolds, the entire teaching and learning community is thrown into disorientation as news of the cover-up leaks and spreads, and it is only after intense personal soul searching and open discussion that the characters are able to come to terms with what has happened and move forward together.

In my education courses it has been personally very rewarding and revealing to watch my students utilize this novel to sort out their own difficult questions and strive to articulate their reasoned yet tentative stands on various educational problems. As my teacher candidates balance their sympathy for Jane in terms of the academic pressures to excel that she surely felt, with the needs of the student government and school administration for transparency and fairness, I believe that they are potentially deepening their sense of what is possible and important about the often conflicted human endeavor called teaching and learning. Even further, I would like to believe that the reading of fiction can indeed provide the occasion for such meaningful learning experiences in other educational contexts.

And yet I somewhat anxiously confess that it is just at this point that my optimism deserts me. Over the last few years in particular, I have too often felt discouraged about how rare and delicate such pedagogical experiences seem to be on a wider scale. When a friend of mine, aware of my passion for the writing of Maxine Greene, argued that I surely had to submit a manuscript to a journal with the “dilemma” or “tension” of “Art, Social Imagination, and Democratic Education,” I heartily agreed and even felt enthusiastic about the possibilities that I might explore. However, my initial composition efforts were awkward and unconvincing. My heart simply was not in it, and a different, hopefully more honest and thereby authentic voice, kept trying to break through.

Luckily, given Greene’s commitment to pluralism in the form of respect and even affection for the different lived realities of others, which is perhaps the ethical tenor of her work that I appreciate the most, I decided to value my intuition. The result was that I became determined to clearly articulate just what I felt needed to be said about the misleading and perhaps even dangerous presupposition that fiction can enhance dimensions of imagination that can in turn support democracy. I want to be clear that I still largely value imaginative writing exactly for this possibility. Yet the truth is that I also keep coming back to the idea that it is absolutely vital to somehow be more *chastened* or moderate about it. I cannot shake the conviction that while remaining supportive of fiction’s place in democratic education, a serious consideration of its limitations would constitute a useful pedagogical contribution.

My approach here is perhaps best described by Annie Dillard (1999) in *For the Time Being*: “For the world is as glorious as ever, and exalting,” she writes, “but for credibility’s sake let’s start with the bad news” (p. 8). The following analyses should be seen as contributing in this spirit to a more “credible” view of the role of literature in education for democracy. My hope is that by providing “the bad news” with the strongest possible hearing, that others might be encouraged to add their own distinctive contributions through further reflection and discussion. Although I am well aware that my argument at certain points may seem provocative, since I confront some pretty widely held assumptions about the relationship between the reading of fiction and the quality of democratic life, I would argue that it is important to come to terms with the issues I raise here in thoughtful ways.

By calling the main section of this essay “*The Bad News from the Inside Out*,” I am signaling the organizational strategy I have adopted in developing my argument. I want to start with the very act of reading itself and then spiral outward to consider broader contextual issues. Thus I begin with attentiveness to fiction itself as a problem, and then move out a little to consider whether fiction actually can enhance some version of empathy. I then address the disturbing claim that reading literature can even make people crueler. I then move further outward still by looking at how public rhetoric about the suffering of others creates pedagogical problems, and then reveal that many teachers in post-secondary institutions have largely abandoned utilizing literature in support of democratic ends. I conclude by considering how a consumer culture frustrates attempts to take literature’s role in democracy seriously. I am keenly aware of how ambitious it may seem to tackle so many points in such a short essay. I would defend my broad approach by reiterating that my primary purpose here is to make the best suggestive argument I can *against* fiction’s role in democratic education so that as many people as possible might find a point of interest with which to take issue and respond.

The Bad News from the Inside Out

Why is being attentive to narrative forms so difficult? What is it about the very act of noticing that can make such extraordinary demands upon us? Consider the following excerpt from a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke (1997):

*See, I am one whom all have deserted
No one knows of me in the city,
leprosy has befallen me.
And I beat upon my rattle,
Knock the sorrowful sight of me into the ears of all
who pass near by (p. 215-216).*

Under the heading *The Voices*, the German poet placed nine poems, all of their titles taking the form of “The Song of the _____,” with a different socially marginalized persona filling in the blank each time. The stanza above, for example, is from “The Song of the Leper,” and the rest of the poems portray such identities as the “Beggar,” the “Orphan,” and even the “Idiot.” In this short collection, Rilke provides us with glimpses into what he imagines sincere and articulate exemplars would say to those who are much better off. The predominant theme of *The Voices* is that when we notice other people giving expression to their pain, the common tendency is to shift our attention elsewhere, failing to further notice them. The next line of the poem above, for instance, referring to how people were affected by the sound of the *Leper*’s rattle, reads “And those who suddenly hear it, look not this way at all.” Rilke’s concern was thus not only with the quality of response to instances of human suffering already recognized as such and therefore deemed to be morally worthy of our concern, but he also alerts us to a depressingly common failure of attentiveness that can make ignoring the experiences of others so alarmingly possible.

Rilke (a poet that Greene, incidentally, is also rather fond of and whose writing she has drawn upon in support of her own work) was so dismayed by the capacity of people to remain indifferent to others that he took up the problem again in prose form. In *Letters to a Young Poet* (1993), which contains his correspondence with a troubled student, Rilke urges in the fourth letter that in our relations with others that we ought to “cling” to “the little things that hardly anyone sees” (p. 34), and he adds some pages later that by doing this we might learn to “love in them life in an unfamiliar form” (p. 39). He believed that this practice of attending to small details could help in the creation of a more generous world. Rilke was very aware, however, of how hard it was to sustain and that it demanded a great deal. In the eighth letter, for instance, he is emphatic on how much “courage” it required: “That is at bottom the only courage that is demanded of us: to have courage for the most strange, the most singular and the

most inexplicable that we may encounter” (p. 67).

Rilke chose the word *courage* because he wanted to imply by contrast that it is *cowardly* never to look around, to notice how other people are doing, to remain narrow and fixated on our own concerns. Yet while Rilke would never cease to be shocked at how common such cowardice was in social life, he was also reservedly confident that the courage to be attentive could be cultivated. As educators we need to remember that a very large part of our job, if we are committed to utilizing narrative to support democratic aims, must be devoted to helping our students persist in their efforts to notice, to pay attention, if they are going to get the most out of their reading experiences. Rilke shows us that the willingness to even try to be attentive to literature should not be taken for granted.

However, if our students press us about *why* exactly we should focus on fiction so carefully and diligently, we should also be careful about the response we give. It would be a mistake to blurt out “because it builds empathy,” for example, without carefully considering the theoretical wrinkles involved. For as André Comte-Sponville (2001) convincingly illustrates in *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues: The Uses of Philosophy in Everyday Life*, philosophers have struggled for a long time to describe just how we ought to relate to the pain of other people. *Compassion, love, charity, sympathy, and empathy*, among others, have all been well discussed and advanced as serious candidates. However, as Comte-Sponville continues, “From the Stoics to Hannah Arendt (by way of Spinoza and Nietzsche), legions of thinkers have criticized compassion, or pity, to use the word most often employed by its detractors,” and he goes on to summarize what he takes to be their strongest case this way:

Their criticisms are nearly always made in good faith and are quite often legitimate. Pity is the sadness one feels in response to the sadness of another: it does not spare the other person his own sadness but rather tends to add to it. Pity only increases the quantity of suffering in the world, and that is what damns it. What good is there in heaping sadness onto sadness, misfortune onto misfortune? (p. 107).

Since the role of empathy, or what the critics call pity, is so central to Greene’s view of fiction’s role in democratic education, I want to make sure that I address detailed and important objections thoroughly. Turning to section 338 of Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* (1974), which in a footnote translator Walter Kaufmann describes as “one of Nietzsche’s best statements of his case against pity” (p. 271), reveals several sharp and important concerns. Nietzsche opens his short yet powerful discussion with the questions “Is it good for you yourselves to be above all full of pity? And is it good for those who suffer?” (p. 269). He then proceeds to advance a number of reasons why both questions should be answered in the negative. His first target is the assumption that it is even possible to share our genuine pain with others: “Our personal and profoundest suffering is incomprehensible and inaccessible to almost everyone” (p. 269). The result of this experiential solipsism is that “whenever people *notice* that we suffer, they interpret our suffering superficially” (emphasis Nietzsche, p. 269). In contrast to this facile reading of pain, Nietzsche offers us what he regards as a more realistic and accurate description of the nature of human suffering:

The whole economy of my soul and the balance effected by “distress,” the way new springs and needs break open, the way in which old wounds are healing, the way whole periods of the past are shred—all such things that may be involved in distress are of no concern to our dear pitying friends: they wish to *help* and have no thought of the personal necessity of distress, although terrors, deprivations, impoverishments, midnights, adventures, risks, and blunders are as necessary for me and for you as are their opposites. (emphasis Nietzsche, p. 269)

The idea that forms of personal distress are not only inevitable in life but are even necessary in order to achieve the highest ranks of happiness, was one that Nietzsche never doubted or even qualified. We

could even say that his oft-quoted line from *Twilight of the Idols* (1968) that “What does not kill me makes me stronger” (p. 33), succinctly conveys his deeply held faith in the power of the human spirit to not just endure the trials of life, but also grow through them to become something better. On Nietzsche’s view the failure to appreciate this role for life’s frustrations results in people not just wanting to help others, but also in maintaining the mistaken belief that “they have helped most when they have helped most quickly” (p. 269). Nietzsche had nothing but contempt for this eagerness to soothe the feelings of others, and in addressing those who most keenly embodied this quality, he confronted them with the observation that “you also harbor another religion in your heart that is perhaps the mother of the religion of pity: the *religion of comfortableness*” (emphasis Nietzsche, p. 270). This demand for comfort, in turn, was the result of not having the strength to follow through on our unique vision of what mattered most to us as individuals: “for our ‘own way’ is too hard and demanding and too remote from the love and gratitude of others” (p. 270).

So for Nietzsche it is bad enough that we misread the suffering of others, fail to appreciate the central role it occupies in making us better people, and try to mistakenly rush in to help others too quickly; but when the roots of such thought and behavior are shown to be our own dependence on approval and our own pathetic dedication to having things easy, then empathy begins to look very suspicious as a moral virtue indeed. Especially given the organized violence and moral horror of the last century in particular, it is hard for many people today to believe that literature can increase empathy at all. It may be an old point by now, but it bears repeating, that the most infamous mass murderers of the last century, the Nazis, were patrons of the arts generally, and many of them, being quite well educated, had read the key novels and poems of the very best European writers of the past.

If we have to grudgingly admit that reading imaginative fiction is in no way a guaranteed route to increasing empathy, the vastly more disturbing possibility is that it is possible for a heightening of sensitivity to the details of other people’s lives to be *too* successful and to actually enhance the capacity for greater cruelty. The best fiction, after all, provides probing details of the most tender vulnerabilities of others, and such knowledge can become conscripted into serving all sorts of reprehensible purposes.

The novel which demonstrates this superbly is George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949/1987). The story is widely known now, but surely the character of O’Brien, the senior Party member, remains one of the most frightening anyone will ever encounter in their reading. For O’Brien, it must be admitted honestly, is not really insane. He is actually brilliant and methodical and deliberate. He gathers intelligence on Winston for seven years for one expressed purpose – to cause Winston as much pain and humiliation as possible. At one particularly awful moment late in the story O’Brien says to Winston, “But always – do not forget this Winston, – always there will be the intoxication of power, constantly increasing and constantly growing subtler” (p. 280). After all, O’Brien and the Party have little to fear from people like Winston. The police in such an authoritarian state can dispatch anyone they please at any time. No, Winston has his mind torn apart to give O’Brien and other Party members pleasure. Once Winston is made to say “Do it to Julia! Do it to Julia!” (p. 300), the destruction of Winston’s personality is complete. Winston will never be able to reconstitute himself after that. Here is knowledge of another person’s life put to the most brutal of purposes. The members of the Party, like O’Brien, are not *just* sadistic – the sad truth is that they are also very smart and patient and actually very attentive to the smallest aspects of other people’s lives.

Even though we do not live in a totalitarian state like the characters in Orwell’s novel, the story is still relevant to those of us who live within a liberal democracy, since it reminds us that the stories our students are reading are highly prone to being warped by widely different social and political discourses, each with its own distinct interpretive interests. My illustration of this point comes from Elizabeth Spelman’s *Fruits of Sorrow* (1997), which looks at the politicized questions one faces when talking about human suffering: “whose pain counts, what such pain means, and who gets to provide

answers to those questions” (p. 88). For Spelman our attention to suffering is uneven and conflicted in that some stories of pain are celebrated, others ignored; some achieve an impact that points beyond their own specific context, while others are not interpreted so widely; and often it seems that what matters most is not who has or is suffering but who has the authority to speak about it.

To demonstrate the cogency of this argument, Spelman discusses Harriot Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, first published in 1861. “One important function of slave narratives,” writes Spelman, “was to generate compassion in their audiences, provoke the kind of feeling that would incline readers to help relieve suffering and oppose evil” (p. 59). In the preface to *Incidents* (1861/1973), Jacobs herself confirms the centrality of this purpose when she explains what she was primarily hoping to achieve by telling her story:

But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what slavery really is. Only by experience can any one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations. (p. xiv)

Notice how Jacobs’ “desire to arouse the women of the North” was to be achieved by her “testimony,” or the telling of her experience of profound suffering caused by the Southern practice of slavery. I think Greene would agree that Jacobs’ novel is exactly the sort of book that has the potential to help make people and the institutions of society less cruel. But Spelman points out the numerous tensions and contradictions that accompany such a reading.

A key theme here, for example, is the delicate relationship between black and white women in the context of slavery that inexorably finds its way into both the construction and reading of the text. On the surface it looks like just a plain fact that Jacobs wrote under the pseudonym “Linda Brent.” But looking deeper reveals that she did so on the advice, according to Spelman, of the white abolitionist, Amy Post (p. 69). Spelman continues that *Incidents* ends with the “self-contradictory moment” where “her freedom is purchased by the northern white woman by whom she was employed” (p. 69). So while wanting to describe hers and others suffering as slaves and thereby move people to feel compassion and, hopefully, work for political and social change, there was the danger for Jacobs that her white readers would pity her in the bad sense and not see slaves as equals, but as people “not like one of us,” who just need to have their freedom bought by others. Spelman goes so far as to contend that:

Incidents is a lesson in how to assert your status as moral agent, and maintain authorship of your experiences, even as you urge your audience to focus on the devastating suffering to which you have been subjected against your will. Brent/Jacobs is well aware that in the process of getting her audience to feel for her and other slaves as crushed victims of an evil institution supported by cruel people, she may simply provoke hostile disapproval of her actions and character, or an anemic kindness, mistakenly understood by those who feel it to be proof of their Christian virtue. (p. 70)

Spelman is right to call our attention to Jacobs’ dual message that slaves needed both to be seen as equal moral agents with the right to tell their own stories, and as victims of an oppressive and cruel institution that required whites to take notice if it was going to be changed. Spelman is also correct when she astutely observes that many whites would be made only uncomfortable by Jacobs’ book, and would otherwise do nothing. Equally unsettling is the thought that even those readers who were sympathetic may have been so for the wrong reasons. Instead of seeing slaves as “people like us” who feel pain and humiliation “like we would,” many surely interpreted Jacob’s message within their own moral vocabulary, even gaining a sense of being “virtuous” by what they saw as their moral allegiance

with Jacobs' message.

I read Spelman as warning us that the stories that people tell about their lives, stories which try to give shape and meaning to their pain and suffering, are prone to being manipulated and even knowingly conscripted into the narratives and interests of others. This raises a concern regarding the extent to which literature generally is even well placed to communicate the stories of others so that "empathy" is increased. Perhaps a significant portion of literature actually encourages the opposite effect by reinforcing sexist, racist, and other prejudicial attitudes.

It is revealing to consider how teachers in post-secondary institutions have felt about many of these problems in their own life and work and utilize literature today in their teaching and research. Philosopher Richard Rorty (1999), for example, in a book entitled *Philosophy and Social Hope*, warns us about what he saw as the most prevalent interest of literary scholars, the production of what he calls "methodical readings":

Methodical readings are typically produced by those who lack what Kermode, following Valéry, calls "an appetite for poetry." They are the sort of thing you get, for example, in an anthology of readings on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* which I recently slogged through—one psychoanalytic reading, one reader-response reading, one feminist reading, one deconstructionist reading, and one new historicist reading. None of the readers had, as far as I could see, been enraptured or destabilized by *Heart of Darkness*. (p. 145)

What is primarily at stake here are two very different views on how we ought to relate to literature. The *methodical* approach, according to Rorty, is specialist and technical, drawing on a refined vocabulary to produce a *reading* or perspective of a given text. By contrast, a *poetic* reading is about being *enraptured* or *destabilized* by a text, having the sort of profound experience, he continues, "which has made a difference to the critic's conception of who she is, what she is good for, what she wants to do with herself" (p. 145). While it might be unfair to conclusively say that none of the writers who contributed to the anthology in question were moved by *Heart of Darkness* in this way, it is fair to say, as Rorty does, that none of their readings provide any indication that they were. What those interpretative essays lack, in other words, is evidence of what Rorty bluntly calls "a great love or a great loathing," the sort of reaction, on a personally seismic scale, that "changes us by changing our purposes, changing the uses to which we shall put people and things and texts we encounter later" (p. 145).

What Rorty's analysis suggests is that the tendency in academic circles to read "methodically" is deep and pervasive. It turns out that it is also older than we might expect. Thirty years ago, for example, John Gardner (1978) complained in *On Moral Fiction* that

The language of critics, and of artists of the kind who pay attention to critics, has become exceedingly odd: not talk about feelings or intellectual affirmations—not talk about moving and surprising twists of plot or wonderful characters and ideas—but sentences full of large words like *hermeneutic*, *heuristic*, *structuralism*, *formalism*, or *opaque language*, and full of fine distinctions—for instance those between *modernist* and *post-modernist*—that would make even an intelligent cow suspicious. Though more difficult than ever before to read, criticism has become trivial. (emphasis Gardner, p. 4)

Of course producing methodical literary interpretations and thereby trivializing fiction might be one thing, and we should certainly expect better from the people paid to teach it, but what is even more disheartening is when even thoughtful readers who approach it in the right way no longer hold out any hope that literature can make any difference to democracy. In *How to Read and Why* (2000) the enormously popular literary theorist Harold Bloom explicitly warns, "Do not attempt to improve your

neighbor or your neighborhood by what or how you read” (p. 24). This is Bloom’s second principle of reading, and the reason he gives for it is that in his limited view “self-improvement is a large enough project for your mind and spirit” (p. 24). How exactly people are supposed to improve themselves without it having at least an indirect impact on social life, Bloom never tells us, but his point is abundantly clear – reading fiction does not contribute to democracy, and it is therefore wrong to even assume it might.

But even if we ignore the literary professionals and try to stay true to Greene’s pedagogical vision by focusing on our own classrooms where we work and make our lives, the threat from the wider capitalist culture is both unavoidable and a complete onslaught. Perhaps the best account of how reading generally has been dampened due to the impact of the pervasive and monolithic entertainment industry, can be found in Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), a book that predicts with frightening accuracy just how dumbed-down and feeble-minded technology could make us. While in Postman’s case the culprit is primarily television, the explosion of the internet since he wrote the book has only made his insights all the more tragic in their force. Cultural life, apparently, is not without a sense of irony, given that Postman offered warnings--in a book--about how books were going to be even further neglected in the face of a growing techno-culture.

To give a personal anecdote that reveals what Postman was driving at, in the mid 1990’s, when I first started teaching in high schools, a new video game had just appeared on the market and was all the latest craze. One day three boys in grade nine tried to explain to me how in the virtual world of the game, if you stole the right cars and hit just the right people while speeding through the city, and killed enough police officers, you could build up enough points and money to have sex with prostitutes. The way to double your point score, however, was to then murder the prostitutes and take the money back. The giggling boys were clearly enjoying telling me how the game worked. When I became visibly annoyed and told them that I found what they were describing quite disgusting, the vice-principal overheard me and asked me to join her in her office. She then told me to tone down such responses in the future and reminded me that it was not the school’s place to tell parents how to spend their own money. When I went back to the staffroom my colleagues reacted with some combination of “you are so naïve!” and “you ain’t seen nothing yet.” Despite tired arguments to the contrary, many aspects of so-called “youth culture,” which, it should be noted, are not actually made *by* youth as they are marketed *at* youth by large corporations, are grossly hyper-violent, demeaning to women, casual in their cruelty, and, most charmingly of all, obnoxious beyond belief.

A Chastened View of the Role of Fiction in Democratic Education

I would like to believe nothing else with more certainty than that on a regular basis, eager students and passionate teachers really are reading works of fiction together that are making a difference to how they live together democratically. But the question remains, given the bad news I have outlined, *how* exactly are educators supposed to encourage Greene’s “wide-awakeness” through the reading of fiction? More specifically, I am left wondering how thoughtful teachers handle the complex realities of textual interpretation, given the necessity of Rilkean courage to pay attention, while facing the lack of assurance that empathy, however defined, is easily secured, and can even degenerate into enhancing various forms of subtle cruelty. I am also left unsure what the right response is to the political rhetoric of suffering that any class of students will inevitably encounter, the lack of support from teachers at the post-secondary level, plus the larger cultural ethos that while being so detrimental to literary values such as listening and caring, seems to celebrate random violence, promiscuous sexuality, and the making of money at whatever the social cost.

I know that I have not done justice to these problems here, and there are no doubt others that I have not even considered. But the one thing that I believe I have shown is that being *chastened* about what exactly the reading of literature contributes to democratic education is a stance worthy of

consideration. To continue to teach literature in schools, despite the problems I have surveyed, is an act of genuine dedication and love on the part of teachers everywhere. From my own experience I know how hard it is, and I respect those teachers who conclude that for them it is simply too daunting and who decide to explore job opportunities elsewhere. But it seems to me that our teachers deserve better for their efforts, on every level. The depressing reality is that to the extent that the “bad news” persists, Greene’s vision of what fiction can do for democracy through the best possible democratic education, shall remain just that, a vision.

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