

INTRODUCTION

Falling into Theory, second edition

Controversies and Paradigms

About 35 years ago, when I began studying literature, the world of literary scholarship appeared to be a noisy and quarrelsome place. Perhaps I just hadn't noticed the arguments and controversies among my science teachers during the years I had spent studying biology. Instead of a clear hierarchy of courses (from introductory through intermediate to advanced biochemistry), I found different and supposedly equal fields of study, such as medieval literature or Romantic poetry. Undergraduates were supposed to learn at least a little about each one, graduate students to choose one as a specialty. Unlike my science teachers, who were all in charge of their own experimental laboratories, my literature teachers had each delineated entirely different roles for themselves. A few were professional bibliographers, compiling research tools for other scholars to use; some were editors, preparing and annotating literary texts; many were scholars, searching out details of authors' lives or of the social and historical contexts of their work; and most were critics, proposing and defending novel interpretations of literary texts. There was an air of teasing and gamesmanship between groups: Medievalists, who had to know various dead languages, might look down on specialists in modern literature; brilliant critics might sneer at the "dry-as-dust" preoccupations of scholars and editors. And intense differences of opinion proliferated among the critics: Neo-Aristotelians attacked New Critics, while both these species (increasingly rare today) argued with the psychoanalytic and archetypal critics.

From the perspective of the present day, however, the world of literary scholarship in the early sixties was a gentle and simple one. For all their internecine quarrels and controversies, my teachers were in essential accord about nearly everything that was basic to their profession. It was generally assumed that literary works at their best were supreme and universal expressions of the human spirit, and that students were to read these profound works in order to broaden and deepen their own humanity. The works to be studied had been sifted by time: only the greatest and the most universal had survived; students reading these texts were connected with the truest and most permanent criterion of taste, the collective applause of humanity. These works were to be read closely and scrutinized carefully. It was presumed that literary meaning was more complicated than the meaning of "everyday" language, that literary texts were ambiguous or bore layers of meaning, each needing to be explored. Nevertheless, it was taken as a given that this complex of meaning was not a private meaning subjectively produced by the operations of a specific reader, but a public meaning objectively available to any seeker. With the exception of the odd Freudian slip, the author's private intentions within his or her texts were generally thought of as out of bounds for speculation.

The assumptions my teachers shared were not treated as propositions to be defended or attacked. These issues were seldom if ever discussed because they formed part of what Michael Polanyi calls the "tacit dimension" of scholarly understanding. When people really agree about things, they can be left unspoken. Literary principles were like mathematical axioms, above debate or beneath it--the substratum of what the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn has called a "paradigm" of knowledge.

A paradigm is a framework of generally accepted assumptions and perspectives that enables researchers to solve problems and answer questions whose relationship to accepted ideas is well understood within their profession. While a paradigm is in place, mainstream researchers can

operate without having at every turn to invent and justify a methodology. For example, astronomers before Copernicus used the Ptolemaic system, in which the sun and the sun's other planets were believed to revolve around the earth. They would carefully observe and record the "retrograde" movement of the outer planets--those periods when Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn appear from here on earth to "back up" and move west for a time before resuming their journey east. These observations were important because they enabled astronomers to predict the planets' orbits and thus to plot the celestial charts of the planets' positions against the starry background that made possible accurate oceanic navigation.

But paradigms are never permanent. For a variety of reasons they break down, and when they do, the field of scholarship moves into a condition in which assumptions and methodologies come under debate and continue in doubt until a new paradigm is established. Kuhn called these transitional periods "scientific revolutions." Such a revolution occurred in astronomy in the sixteenth century after Copernicus posited that the planets revolve around the sun. During this revolution, ordinary science--observation and experimentation-- was suspended, as the underpinnings of the discipline were debated. Eventually the Ptolemaic paradigm of an earth-centered universe disappeared; only then could "normal science" resume.¹

Around 25 years ago, in America, in England and on the continent, the paradigm underlying literary study began to dissolve. The enabling assumptions that made possible "normal" research and scholarship began to come undone. Instead of calling this a scientific revolution, however, I would prefer to say that we have fallen into a state of theory.

The Theory of Everything

The fall into theory has been pervasive, since the old consensus has broken down on all fronts, from the most general issues about the nature and purpose of higher education to very specific questions about the interpretation of literary texts. Theory, as Gerald Graff has argued, is the sort of talk we talk when we have lost our consensus, when nothing "goes without saying," so that we have to define every term and justify every statement in the arguments we offer to defend our ideas.

Let me illustrate by quoting, from Graff's Beyond the Culture Wars, a hypothetical dialogue between two English department colleagues. One, an "Older Male Professor" (OMP), is dumbfounded at the confusion into which his class was thrown by the last lines of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach":

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! For the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,

¹Though wrong (as we think today) in its fundamental assumption that the sun and planets revolve around the earth, Ptolemaic astronomy could be astonishingly precise in its observations and predictions. In precision, Copernican astronomy did not catch up to the "clumsy" Ptolemaic epicycles till it was accepted that (as Kepler had suggested) the planetary orbits were ellipses rather than (as Copernicus had assumed) perfect circles.

Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
 And we are here as on a darkling plain,
 Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
 Where ignorant armies clash by night.

The other, a "Young Feminist Professor" (YFP), says she learned to hate poetry by being forced in high school to study "Dover Beach."

OMP...: In my humble opinion--reactionary though I suppose it now is--"Dover Beach" is one of the great masterpieces of the Western tradition, a work that, until recently at least, every seriously educated person took for granted as part of the cultural heritage.

YFP: Perhaps, but is that altogether to the credit of the cultural heritage? Take those lines addressed to the woman: "Ah, love, let us be true to one another..." and so forth. In other words, protect and console me, my dear--as it's the function of your naturally more spiritual sex to do--from the "struggle and flight" of politics and history that we men have been assigned the regrettable duty of dealing with.... We should teach "Dover Beach." But we should teach it as the example of phallogentric discourse that it is.

OMP: That's the trouble with you people; you seem to treat "Dover Beach" as if it were a piece of political propaganda rather than a work of art.... The whole point of poetry ... is to rise above such transitory issues by transmuting them into universal human experience.... "Dover Beach" is no more about gender politics than Macbeth is about the Stuart monarchical succession.

YFP: But Macbeth is about the Stuart monarchical succession, among other things--or at least its original audience may well have thought so. It's about gender politics, too: Why does Lady Macbeth have to "unsex" herself to qualify to commit murder? ... What you take to be the universal human experience in Arnold and Shakespeare ... is male experience presented as if it were universal.... (38-39)

This is the sort of dialogue we hear when theory has broken out. No longer does anything go without saying, and anything that can be said can be contested. The basic assumptions of Graff's OMP--that "Dover Beach" is unquestionably part of the canon of poetical masterworks, that this canon ought to be part of what every educated person learns, that literature is a "universal human experience" that rises above the transitory problems of society and politics--make no sense to YFP. Similarly, her view that Victorian poems and Renaissance plays are "about gender politics" and portray male experience as if it were "universal" seems ridiculous to him. The two professors disagree about the meaning of the last lines of Arnold's poem, the attitude we ought to take toward them, and they disagree about the merit of the poem: Is it a great masterwork or an "example of phallogentric discourse"? If their debate were to continue much further, it would cease to be about the particulars of the poem--though both professors would continue to justify their views by appealing to these particulars. Instead, it would be about the function of poetry, the function of the traditional canon of masterworks in today's society, and the questions it is legitimate to put to a literary text. The debate would be, in other words, about theory itself.

The implications of this debate are profound. OMP's contested notion that great masterworks appeal to what is universal in the human condition speaks to the value of the humanities within contemporary society, the question of *why* people should read literature at all, and what benefits

individuals and their society derive from it. As a result of this debate, scholars no longer agree about what a university ought to be, nor about what the humanities are, how they are structured as disciplines, or why anyone should want to learn or teach them.

OMP's contested notion that Arnold is part of the canon--that selective list of literary works everyone should master--speaks to the question of *what* literary texts are worth reading, who has drawn up that canon, and what criteria have been used in the process of selection. At issue is whether we should defend the idea of a slowly evolving, collectively determined group of classics; whether we should massively expand the canon to include more works by women and minorities; or whether the very idea of a canon still makes sense.

And YFP's contested notion that our interpretation of Arnold's poem should not be limited to the meaning that Arnold himself would have placed on it, that we can understand the text in ways that go beyond the ways it understands itself, speaks to the question of *how* we should read literature. Some scholars view the reader as formed morally and intellectually by the text; others view the act of reading as a collaborative quasi-independent performance, like pianists' renditions of a Schubert sonata, no two alike; while still others would claim that readers virtually write the text themselves. We don't even agree about whether our debates and dialogues should be leading us to a new consensus or whether, once disagreement breaks out, there's nothing much to be done about it.

I will be going into considerably more detail about each of these questions – why we read, what we read, and how we read – in my introductions to each section of this book, but for now I want to stress the three types of questions that have been raised here.

First are the questions about why we read literature. Questions about the function of literature, and more generally about the function and role of the humanities and of the universities in which they are taught, may not seem political at first glance. However, the consensus view that I absorbed in my own education harked back to Matthew Arnold's deeply political concept of the humanities. As Terry Eagleton has noted (see "The Rise of English," reprinted on pp. 00-00), Arnold viewed the humanities as a conservative socializing force in a world of declining religious belief: contact with the finest specimens of arts and letters would bring humanity together in a system of values that could transcend the interests of self and class. To Victorians like Arnold who were terrified of the polarizing forces being unleashed in society by industrialization, forces that pitted an irresponsible class of owner-managers against an equally irresponsible class of impoverished daily workers, the idea of the humanities as a stabilizing influence within culture was very attractive. This idea can be equally attractive to conservatives today, who feel that society is in danger of flying apart as traditional values and traditional power structures are discarded. But what about those who conceive of society and its traditional values as fundamentally unjust rather than just? For those who believe that society systematically discriminates against and degrades women, or gays, or African Americans and other minority groups, Arnold's program--in which individuals spiritually assimilate themselves to the dominant forces of Western culture--merely perpetuates the oppression. And for those who conceive their goal as changing the structure of society by harnessing the energies of people who have been excluded or mistreated primarily because of their race, class, or gender, Arnold's universalizing vision of the humanities is anathema. For the contemporary radical, the university itself is not an independent community of scholars, as my generation had been taught, but (in Louis Althusser's term) an Ideological State Apparatus, an institution that serves the centralized state by indoctrinating its citizens in the reigning versions of false consciousness and certifying potentially useful members of the ruling cadre.

The second question is what we should read. The literary canon is an unofficial short list of literary texts deemed worthy of serious study and consideration, which every educated person should know. If the central purpose of the humanities is either to change the world or to conserve things as they are, the question of the canon becomes crucial. For those who want to change the world, the notion that the quality of canonical texts is guaranteed by their having been sifted throughout time also becomes seriously suspect. Time, after all, sifts nothing by itself: it is people who sift. Canonical works become canonical because human beings read them and love them, but we cannot read and love works to which we have no access. To be read, a book must first be published, reviewed, and publicized. These things are done by men--usually in fact by white males of European descent. Those who reject the current canon, however, cannot decide whether it should simply be expanded to include more women and minority writers, or whether all canonization of literary texts--all claims that certain works are "classics" whose appeal is unbounded by time and place--should be dropped on the grounds that every choice of what should or should not be read is an implicitly political act.

Finally there is the question of how we should read. Literary scholars used to presume that although literature had complex and multilevel meanings, interpretation of a text was the same for every reader. While I as a reader might have private associations with a work (there might be a character who reminds me of my sister), my sense of the public meaning of the work was derived by excluding all the merely idiosyncratic connections it made with my life. Each of us was to assimilate himself or herself to the universal human being who was the "ideal audience" of the text. This would seem a position beyond politics until one asks the uncomfortable question: What sex is this universal human being--and what race, religion, and nationality? When a woman reads a misogynistic poem (like Donne's "Song: Goe and catch a falling starre," which seems to assert that no woman could simultaneously be "true and fair," beautiful and honorable), is she to read it as an ideal member of the audience--in effect, as a man? Must African American students who read Huckleberry Finn put themselves in the place of the white audience for whom Mark Twain wrote? How can members of an audience be required to put aside their customary identities when they read a text? But on the other side, it is unrealistic and anachronistic to expect authors from other ages to exactly replicate our contemporary values. When women read the Donne poem as women, is Donne bashing women or are the women bashing Donne?

Once our traditional set of assumptions about how we should read literature dissolves, a host of new questions arises. Critics have begun to ask whether the rules of interpretation, the procedures for extracting meaning, are the same for all texts. For example, are texts produced by a minority group within a dominant culture to be read differently than texts written by the dominant group? And once we begin to call into question the notion of a "universal" reader or writer, even categorizing readers and writers as members of ethnic or gender groups becomes questionable since the categories become too numerous, and implicit assumptions about the various groups smack too much of stereotyping. Perhaps there is nothing firmer than the individual reading, in all its subjectivity. Perhaps the reader in effect "writes" the text by bringing all his or her preconceptions to its innocent words. Some theorists have asked whether our desire to have texts "mean" at all--to explain life to us--is not simply a symptom of a metaphysical pathos we need to rise above. And others have suggested that we should be asking literature for aesthetic rather than moral values, for beauty rather than truth. All in all, the variety of social and political principles to which contemporary theorists have appealed can bewilder even the professionals.

Why We Fell into Theory

How did we get into this state? How did the consensus come to break down? The public debates have centered on some of the political and sociological reasons for the outbreak of theory. In the early 1990s, a group of conservative journalists suggested that it all had to do with the student radicals of the 1960s, opponents of the Vietnam War, who grew up, went to graduate school, and became the faculty leaders of the early 1990s: feminism, multiculturalism, and poststructuralism, according to this view, were produced by the cultural politics of a disaffected generation. This was the thesis of Roger Kimball, editor of the conservative New Criterion, and his book Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Higher Education. It is true that many advocates of radical positions today (such as Cary Nelson, author of the defiant Manifesto of a Tenured Radical) were first politicized in the late 1960s. But I don't think it makes a lot of sense to treat the fall into theory as a case of demonic possession--in this case, of the world of letters--by a small group of radicals. Certainly they would be preaching to themselves and to one another had it not been for certain wide and deep movements since that day.

One of those important movements is essentially intellectual. Literature is not the only field that has been shaken and complicated over the last few decades, in which old narratives have broken down. Many of the social sciences, such as history and anthropology, have been redrawn by our growing awareness of multiple perspectives that yield competing narratives and analyses. When I went to high school I absorbed a coherent narrative of the European voyages of discovery and the colonization of the Americas or of the Revolutionary War. The point of view was triumphalist: my classmates and I were trained in the perspective of the European conquerors, in the first case, and in that of the successful wagers of a war of liberation in the second. By today's standards this view was incomplete. Most elementary and high school history textbooks today make an effort to include the perspectives of the native Americans wiped out by European diseases, of the Africans carried over to the new world to work as slaves in the plantations. In the case of the American revolution, we have discovered that some of the revolutionaries were also land speculators, that England had its own valid point of view, as did the Tory loyalists who were forced to give up their property and flee to Canada. These were always part of the truth, and, to an extent, were always recognized as such. Today we prefer our truths complicated rather than simple.²

The other movement is sociological. In the 1960s, when the consensus about education in the humanities was last firmly in place, a much smaller proportion of the nation's youth went to college, and in my own teachers' day the proportion was smaller still.³ At that time, the notion that the reader of literary texts was a white male of Western European descent was not so far off the

² The historical novelist Kenneth Roberts, whose bestknown book, Northwest Passage, tells a heroic story of Americans fighting the French and Indians, in the 1760s, also wrote Oliver Wiswell from the perspective of a Tory family during the Revolution.

³The college population more than doubled between 1960 and 1979. In 1960 only 17.2 percent of men and 14.8 percent of women over the age of 25 had completed even one year of college; in 1970 the corresponding statistics were 24.1 percent of men and 18.8 percent of women; in 1979, 38.1 percent of men and 33.7 percent of women. For 1960 and 1970 statistics, see Table 1, "Educational Attainment," in Census Reports for those years published by the U.S. Bureau of the Census; for 1979, see Bureau of Labor Statistics special report 240.

mark. The English faculty at my elite Midwestern college employed no African Americans and precisely one tenured female. There were few African American students and no Latinos--at least I don't remember any in my literature classes. There were plenty of women, but it was assumed that few of them would be going on to graduate school, especially at the doctoral level: their destiny was probably teaching in the public high schools and elementary schools. At less elite schools, many women attended college to get their "M.R.S." degree--to attract and marry a man who would support them.

It need hardly be said how different things are now, thanks in part to two products of the 1960s, feminism and the civil rights movement. It is true that women and minorities still do not make up their due proportion of tenured faculty (or of top corporate executives, for that matter). And it is true that African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans do not go to college in proportion to their numbers in population. Nowadays, however, the most talented minority students are actively recruited by the most prestigious Ivy League colleges, and no teacher can assume that his or her class will consist entirely or even primarily of white male students of Western European origin, or that the female students are less ambitious than the males.

But at the same time higher education was opening up to students of greater diversity, the massive loss of high-paying manufacturing jobs has made it more and more difficult for people to achieve the "American dream" of financial well-being without a white-collar job, for which a college degree--at the bare minimum--has become the ticket. As competition for professional jobs has intensified, so have the attractions of "identity politics": the feeling of solidarity with other women, other gays, other African Americans, other "ethnics" in a world still dominated by white Anglo males. Within the university, identity politics gets manifested in demands for a more culturally diverse curriculum, a greater inclusion of women, African Americans, gays, and other minorities in reading lists, and an identity politics of interpretation---the what and why of reading. These pluralistic movements, given the intense competition for the best schools, places, and jobs, have not been uncontested: they have inspired a fierce political backlash, particularly on the part of the white Anglo males whose supremacy is threatened. Federal and state programs of "affirmative action" designed to help women and minorities have been attacked by referendum and other forms of legislation. And a similar backlash is evident within the university, as scholars question whether "area studies" programs have broadened our knowledge of culture or watered it down.

It isn't easy to imagine the past thirty years without these political and social conflicts, and it is tempting to assume that this alone is responsible for the fall into theory. But something of the sort might well have occurred in any case, as it has in countries unlike the United States with different issues of cultural politics. Theoretical talk breaks out whenever we disagree about fundamentals, and since at least the 1930s, philosophers have become increasingly suspicious of systems of thought that rest on strong essentially unprovable axioms about the nature of reality, or society, or human psychological processes. Grant Plato his assumption that the world of matter and appearances we know is informed by a transcendent world of ideas, and there follows inescapably the political, ethical, educational, and aesthetic conclusions of the Republic. But refuse him this foundation, and the system vanishes for lack of a place to stand. The same is true of other systematic thinkers, like Kant or Hegel, Marx or Freud. Since the days of Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Dewey, academic discourse has become ever more distrustful of foundationalist systems, and it has necessarily become more pragmatic: new methods are measured, not by their

conformity to the authority of the past, but by the agreement they can command, based on the useful work they can do.

After the Fall: Theory Without Fear

If this controversy has its wide and public setting, it also has its private venues, in introductory and advanced classes in English and American literature. And if none of us can predict how the grand struggle will come out, we can at least become savvy about the sorts of issues that surface in the classroom. So let me return finally to the question of theory itself. Theory, let me repeat, is the talk we talk when a consensus breaks down, when we begin to disagree about fundamental principles and to argue about which principles are truly fundamental. There is nothing mysterious about it. Two teenagers arguing about whether one of their teachers is open-minded or wishy-washy, or about whether it is a band's material or performance technique that makes it so great, can get quickly to the edge of some region of theory, where fundamental questions about values and quality, means and ends, public and private experience are raised. That edge is easily recognized--for in a state of theory people ask us to define or clarify our terms, and start contesting those definitions and categories. When friends disagree, they make a serious attempt to find out how much of the disagreement is merely over semantics--the categories of discussion, the meanings of words--and how much is a debate over fundamental values.

Controversies can exist without leading to this sort of theoretical talk. If Professor A claims that Wordsworth fathered an illegitimate child in France around 1792 and Professor B is skeptical of the claim, we have a controversy all right, but (as long as both agree that Wordsworth is a great poet whose private life bore on the meaning of his poetry) the disagreement concerns a fact and is unlikely to occasion an outbreak of theory. Even forty years ago, a certain low level of theoretical talk flourished without disturbing the basic consensus about what literature was and did. The difference between a controversy and a "state of theory" may seem merely a matter of degree, but sometimes differences of quantity become differences in quality--like the difference between a sigh and an asthmatic attack. Normally we can define a potentially confusing term or discuss the special stance we're taking toward a question. But once we have fallen into a state of theory, we can hardly begin to talk without first presenting our approach to fundamental issues. What we have to say makes sense, after all, only when the problem or question is framed in a certain way.*⁴

If philosopher Thomas Kuhn is right (and if his ideas about the history of science are applicable to the humanities), there should be nothing too dreadful in the long run about the state of theory into which the field of literary study has fallen. It does not betoken the end of the world, or of the humanities, or of literary scholarship and criticism, as some critics of the academy have feared. It merely means that a scholarly field has reached a point of revolution, or at least of transition

⁴Today, authors of academic essays on particular novels or poems often start out by "situating themselves" within the discourse of the profession. This act of "framing" is intended to make it easier for insiders to understand just how the author of a critical essay is planning to approach the texts, what theories or assumptions will be used. But since the framing often uses special theoretical terms to indicate the author's allegiances, the use of jargon can make these essays even more opaque to students or the general public.

between one mode of inquiry and another. And if the humanities are like the sciences, some new set of professional norms will sooner or later establish itself in the community of literary scholars and teachers, everyone will once more agree on which questions are worth pursuing and how to go about pursuing them, and theoretical discourse will again become optional rather than necessary. How long this may take is of course anybody's guess, and the possible range is wide. The revolution in earth sciences caused by the new theory of plate tectonics⁵ took no more than a decade, but the Copernican revolution in astronomy took several generations, and was complete only when the influential Ptolemaic astronomers had died out.

Scholars of my teachers' generation, or my own, whose blissful sense of purpose has been upset by the awkward questions now being raised on all sides about the nature and function of the humanities may argue that, in the long run, each swing of the pendulum must eventually be followed by an equally powerful return swing. This faction may take comfort in the fact that, as I write today in 1999, many literary scholars are reviving issues of aesthetic pleasure that had been shelved during the intense investigation of social ideology. But it is also possible that the humanities are fundamentally different from the sciences, and once we have fallen into theory we cannot carve out a trail to a new discourse in which theoretical issues can be safely neglected.

Indeed, there are other, more ominous signs that the state of theory has caused a fundamental split in the discourse about literature, and that some of the traditional rationales for the discipline of literary study as it has been practiced over the last half century have vanished into the yawning crevasse. Over the last few years proposals have surfaced to remake the discipline of literary studies into a branch of cultural studies, amalgamating with kindred spirits in fields like anthropology, sociology, and history. Still other scholars have suggested taking a cue from the usual placement of English composition within departments of English Literature, and refocusing the mission of the profession on the study of rhetoric, discourse, and the history of discursive practices, where the traditional literary classics would still find a place. The current crisis of the disciplines, and the growing trend to refocus literary study as cultural anthropology or as rhetoric, will be discussed in considerably greater detail in the introduction to Part One.

Meanwhile, and for as long as the present state of theory lasts, making sense of the world of letters will be increasingly uncomfortable, and not only for the conservative scholars whose world-view has been challenged, the radicals who would like to set up their own views as the norm, and journalists who have their own stake in the outcome of these quarrels and have attempted to summarize and digest them for the general public. It will also be uncomfortable for students listening in on these debates and trying to learn from them--both those thinking about entering literary studies as a profession and those planning to major in English on the way to law school or a business career. The entering student is a bystander to a conversation, a debate that has been building for at least two decades, and he or she needs to know what the options are and what is at stake.

⁵**plate tectonics:** The theory that earthquakes, volcanos, and mountain-building processes occur through the relative movement of enormous rigid blocks of which the earth's crust is composed. While precursors of the theory go back to the 1890s (e.g., Alfred Wegener's notion of "continental drift"), plate tectonics began to be developed around 1960 and was accepted globally by about 1968. Earth scientists who developed plate tectonics include Bruce Heezen, Henry Lenard, Harry Hess, J. Tuzo Wilson, and Lynn Sykes.

Take the question of the literary canon. Many literature departments have some teachers who defend the literary canon they grew up with, others who propose expansion of the canon to include formerly ignored works by women and minorities, and still others view the very idea of a literary canon as an issue whose time has passed. But not every teacher, of whatever persuasion, is going to be willing to debate the question in class or even to try to justify his or her own stance; many will simply presume without discussion their own preconceived notions of truth. Questions of interpretation are even more fundamental. Some instructors presume that each student can, with practice, come up with the same "correct" reading; others that there are many "correct" readings but that misreading is possible and avoidable; and still others that, since the reader constitutes the text, the best any of us can do is to come up with a "strong misreading" of the text, but no reading can be dismissed as "incorrect." Moving from one teacher to another, one eventually gets the idea that these fundamental issues are up for grabs, but it may be more efficient--and more satisfying--to start with a primer on the subjects about which all the experts disagree. Using accessible examples of scholarly writing, this book introduces the nonprofessional reader to some of the controversies within the literary profession that have no solutions or answers as yet.

The book focuses on the three central issues I have raised above:

1. WHY WE READ. The first section's selections discuss the personal and social motivations for reading literature. They discuss the origin of literary studies in England, America, and the rest of the anglophone world, and the social implications of literary study for cultural containment and critique. The selections raise such questions as: What is the place of the humanities and literary studies in society? What is the study of literature as a discipline? Why do we read?
2. WHAT WE READ. This section centers on what is, or should be, the subject of literary studies. Selections defend the traditional canon of literary studies, call for expansion of the canon, and challenge the very concept of a canon. The selection raises questions such as: What is literature and who determines what counts as literature? Is there a core of "great books" that every student should read? What is the relationship of literature by women and minority groups to the canon? Are criteria of quality universal, or are literary values essentially political? [What is the relation of the canon to the educational curriculum?](#)
3. HOW WE READ. This section raises questions of interpretation: How do we and how should we read texts? Rather than systematically covering all of the different schools of literary theory, the section introduces the idea that there are different ways of considering the relationship between reader and text. The selections raise such questions as these: Does meaning reside in the author, the text, or the reader? To what degree is the meaning of a text fixed? How do we understand the place of literary texts in history? What ethical concerns do we bring to texts as readers, and how do these concerns reshape the texts we read? What do we owe the text and what does it owe us? How do the politics of race and gender shape our reading of texts? Do ideological approaches to literature betray texts or shed light on them? Can we do better than the "strong misreading"?

These three questions--why, what, and how--inevitably overlap. Alan Purves's "Telling Our Story about Teaching Literature" argues that producing "disciplined reflective and refractive talk" is the goal whether the text analyzed is a play by Shakespeare or a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon. We

decided to print the essay in the "what" section, but it also clearly addresses questions of method ("how") along with the purposes of liberal education ("why"). Specific topics such as multiculturalism and feminism will come up in all three sections, as they bear on all three questions.

There is an enormous excitement about the literary profession these days. Radical changes are afoot in the structure and method of professing literature, along with new ways of organizing traditional disciplines. Senior scholars whose ideas have come under debate have had to examine and respond to these challenges, to find new ways of defending old ideas. Students are, as usual, in the middle: presumed allies of both sides, they are told what to think at every turn. The purpose of this book is to provide access not just to the arguments themselves but to a "meta" level above or behind the controversies where one can hear the various arguments proposed from all sides, decide who makes how much sense, get an idea of what is at stake and, in the course of seeking one's own solutions, find one's own voice.

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