Chapter Seven  

Novelistic Empathy, and How to Teach It

I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life.... Art and Life are not one, but they must become one, united in the unity of my responsibility.

—Mikhail Bakhtin1

A Crisis of Massive Proportions

Go to the English department, gather round the coffee pot, and listen to the Great Kvetch. Someone is sure to cite some recent lament about an underestimated crisis threatening the world.

“We are in the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance,” Martha Nussbaum begins her recent book, Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities (NFP). And what is this crisis of massive proportions? No, not imminent economic collapse, nor looming environmental disaster, nor the spread of nuclear weapons. At least we discern such threats, but the worst of all “goes largely unnoticed, like a cancer; a crisis that is likely to be, in the long run, far more damaging to the future of democratic self-government” (NFP, 7-8). When a writer invokes the insidious progress of a cancer, you know she hopes to forestall the objection that little visible evidence supports her argument.

This cancer threatening democracy and the world is: declining enrollments in literature courses. And declined they have. In a much-cited article in The American Scholar, William M. Chace (a professor of English and former president of Wesleyan University and Emory University) reports that from 1970/71—the peak year for enrollments—to 2003/4, the number of English majors declined from 7.6% to 3.9%, and majors in foreign literatures from 2.5% to 1.3%.2 The Modern

1 I have modified the translation in M. M. Bakhtin, “Art and Answerability,” AA, 1-2.
2 William M. Chace, “The Decline of the English Department: How it
Language Association’s Teagle Report of 2009 reports a decline (in absolute numbers) of 18% for English majors between the high-water mark of 1971 and 2004, and 27% for foreign literature majors since its high-water mark in 1969. As a percentage of total degrees awarded, the decline is much steeper.\(^3\) But why is this crisis so important to anyone except humanities professors?

Somewhere, I suppose, there is a shoemaker envisioning the collapse of civilization due to the rising price of leather.

Unless we solve this crisis, Nussbaum warns, democracy, decency, and “critical thinking” will all disappear. But to solve a crisis one must identify its cause. So why is it that students are choosing to study economics or chemistry rather than literature?

Nussbaum widely avoids one Luddite answer increasingly given: because of technology, students now have short attention spans and so cannot be expected to read Dickens or Tolstoy. Are chemistry and economics better suited for the attentionally challenged? Does anyone really doubt that it is easier to pass an English class with little work than the pre-med curriculum? But Nussbaum still wants to blame the students and the culture that has shaped them.

When I was growing up in the Bronx, the owner of the local Jewish deli, whose meats smelled vaguely rancid and whose bagels seemed to start out already a day old, attributed his failing business to the vulgarization of taste. In every age the unappreciated consider themselves geniuses born in the wrong time. Since I started teaching literature some thirty-five years ago, humanities professors have been attributing declining enrollments to their students’ materialism, careerism, and philistine desire for profit. As the title of her book indicates, Nussbaum arrives at the same self-serving answer.

The book’s conclusion cites Harvard president Drew Faust, who regrets “a deep decline the percentage of students majoring in the liberal arts and sciences, and an accompanying increase in preprofessional undergraduate degrees.” Faust asks whether universities “have

\(^3\) Modern Language Association, “Report to the Teagle Foundation on the Undergraduate Major in Language and Literature,” http://www.mla.org/pdf/2008_mla_whitpaper.pdf, 15.
become too captive to the immediate and worldly purposes they serve? Has the market model become the fundamental and defining identity of higher education?” (NFP, 124). No one ever lost the allegiance of the faculty by blaming “the market.”

Can it really be that students are more materialistic now than in those proverbial eras of backwardness, the 1950s and 1980s? Professor Chace notes that despite reduced materialist incentives since the recession, and “the debacle on Wall Street,” students “are still wagering that business jobs will be there when the economy recovers.” Chace, as it happens, is one of the few who asks whether literature professors might themselves be selling the academic equivalent of bad-tasting bagels. “Unable to change history or rewrite economic reality,” he comments, English professors “might at least have kept their own house in order. But this they have not done.” He suggests that the decline might have something to do with “the failure of departments of English across the country to champion, with passion, the books they teach and to make a strong case to undergraduates that the knowledge of those books and the tradition in which they exist is a human good in and of itself…. They have distanced themselves from the young people interested in good books.” If so, then perhaps students avoid literature classes not because they are wagering on business degrees but because they reason that if English professors do not seem to believe in literature, why should they?

For decades, literature professors have been teaching that the canon is a mere construct; that social power relations alone determine what is considered great literature; and that there are no intrinsic or objective standards of greatness. To think otherwise is to endorse the greatest philosophical enemy of social justice, “essentialism,” that is, the belief that people or artifacts have inherent qualities. Literature is just another social document, and the turn to “cultural studies,” where the works once considered intrinsically great enjoy no “privilege” over other documents, has followed.

But if Shakespeare is not intrinsically great, and if great works teach us nothing one cannot learn more easily elsewhere, why bother reading them? It does not seem to occur to most English professors that if what predominant theories assert is correct, students would be fools to study literature. Could the decline in enrollments reflect not so much materialism or preprofessionalism as good sense?

One reason I wonder at these debates is that my experience has been so different from the trend. As it happens, I teach Northwestern
University’s best-enrolled humanities course, with 600 students, and the academic year before last, two of the courses with the highest enrollment (the third featured live sex demonstrations).

These are classes in Russian literature. In one, students read Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov* and Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, and in the other, they read *War and Peace*.

In most universities, enrollments in “Tolstoyevsky” courses hover at around twenty, since students who search for literature courses under “English” do not know to look as well under “Slavic Languages and Literatures.” I am even more gratified that a large number of students report on official evaluation forms that, though they had been skeptical of “all the hype,” this course really did make them understand why literature is worth serious study.

No student has ever told me that he or she does not take more literature courses because, in these difficult economic times, one needs to devote every moment to maximizing future income, which, after all, is what really matters. On the contrary, students respond by describing some literature course they have taken, which left them thinking that, apart from “appearing educated” or getting an easy A, they had nothing to gain from taking any more. When I heard their descriptions of these classes, I saw their point. No hint of that experience appears in MLA reports.

If students take English, we are told, they will learn “critical thinking.” Apart from the fact that every discipline claims to teach some form of critical thinking—is it absent from philosophy and cognitive science?—perhaps the problem is that the students are already adept enough at thinking critically to take literature professors who do not believe in literature at their word.

**Teaching as Subtraction**

What can students learn from literature they cannot learn elsewhere? Why should they bother?

Literature professors rarely ask these questions. For understandable reasons, they assume the importance of their subject matter. But students are right to ask them. Any course is expensive: in money, in time, and in what economists call opportunity costs. To study seventeenth-century English lyric, one foregoes another course not just in something practical, but also in something that is also intellectually challenging.
Will Rogers once remarked, “We are all ignorant, only on different subjects.” To teach anything well, you have to place yourself in the position of the learner who does not already know the basics and has to be persuaded that the subject is worth studying. One has to subtract knowledge and assumptions one has long since forgotten having learned. It’s like reminding yourself you once did not know how to walk. Without such empathy and subtraction, teaching is unlikely to succeed.

All too often, undergraduate courses tacitly presume that students will become literature professors. And that is natural enough, since those are the sort of students literature professors most easily imagine. But if one wants to persuade future chemists, businessmen, and physicians to read novels, this approach will likely prove counterproductive.

For anyone but future English professors, does it make sense to teach theory in undergraduate courses? Would students not be wise to reason: either literature is less interesting than these theorists, or one first has to know very difficult and obscure methods before one even starts to read great works? If one has neither the taste nor time for such preliminaries, then literature will remain forever out of reach.

The first task is to get the student to want to read literature. Students see the point of wisdom, guidance in how to think about their values and decisions. We tend to laugh at such a conception as somehow philistine. An English class isn’t church, nor is romantic poetry the Book of Common Prayer! When students want to know “the meaning of life,” we smile—the sort of smile we assume students can’t detect. However, people’s ability to perceive condescension is usually sharper than we imagine.

Clara Claiborne Park—best known for her book about raising an autistic child, The Siege—devoted an essay to the experience of teaching literature in a community college. At the end of the semester, one farmboy asked her: “Mrs. Park. We’ve read what Homer says about the afterlife, and what Plato says, and now we’re reading what Dante says and they’re all different. Mrs. Park. Which one of them is true?” She recalls her reaction: “I smile, of course. I suppress, just in time, the condescending laugh, the easy play to the class’s few sophisticates,
who are already laughing surreptitiously.... But the open seriousness on the boy’s face encourages reflection. Who, in this class, is reading as Plato and Dante would have expected to be read? And who is asking the right questions, I and my sophisticates, or this D-level student whom I have just time to realize I shall put down at my peril?” As Tolstoy would ask, who should learn reading from whom? Don’t teach simple students to be “sophisticated,” teach the sophisticates to ask simple questions in a more profound way.

Ask yourself: why do you think Tolstoy, Dickens, and George Eliot wrote their novels? Surely it was not to provide obscure puzzles for scholars to solve! So much professional training leads us to forget what undergraduates know, that literature needs to mean something or it is not worth studying.

Park chose the title of her essay—“Rejoicing to Concur with the Common Reader”—to challenge the professional establishment. She was alluding to Dr. Johnson’s famous comment about Thomas Gray’s “Elegy in a Country Churchyard”: “I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common sense of readers, uncorrupted with literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtilty and the dogmatism of learning, must finally be decided all claims to poetic honors.” By citing these lines, she utters them anew. They remind us that the dogmatism of learning and laboriously acquired refinements can obscure the obvious. This is never a message professionals like to hear.

**Philology Substitutes**

What Johnson’s passage does not say, but Park’s essay does, is that professionals have a stake in not concurring with the common reader whenever possible. Professionals have to justify their status above laymen. Since many people love Jane Austen and Dickens, literature professors must do something that requires training and differs from what a nonprofessional could do. There must be something requiring initiation and certification.

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5 Clara Claiborne Park, “Rejoicing to Concur with the Common Reader,” *Rejoining the Common Reader: Essays, 1962-1990* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 1-2. The epigraph for this volume contains the same sentences from Bakhtin as does the present essay.
Serious university instruction in English began by imitating the study of classical languages and requiring a lot of philology. As Slavists my age or older will recall, that used to be true of our discipline as well. I have a recently retired colleague who passed examinations demanding he translate on sight thirteenth century Bulgarian into fifteenth-century Polish. Even in my watered-down Yale program, I had to trace every word in a passage from Old Church Slavonic back to Proto-Indo-European, forward to modern Russian, and across to other Indo-European languages. When I entered Oxford as a graduate student in 1969, the requirements for an undergraduate degree in English included pages of topics in Old Norse and Old English, eventually proceeding to Middle English and the Renaissance. And then, on the last page of requirements, one line read: “English literature 1660 to the present.” When I inquired what was meant by “the present,” I was told that it had just been moved up from 1880 to 1914.

Such accomplishment required professional training. Without it, no reasonably literate person could read *Beowulf* or the *Volsungsaga* in the original. If one thinks of the sociology of the professions, it becomes pretty clear why the “new criticism” was bound to disappear. Like all critical schools, it had been applied so widely and its methods had become so familiar that something different was needed if professors were to publish or even retain their interest. The new criticism, however, posed the added problem that it could be done without much expert knowledge. It made, and was designed to make, literature available to nonspecialists. In so doing, it tacitly raised the question of why literature professors are needed in the first place.

So the profession developed *philology substitutes*, which do, without philology, what philology used to do. How much time do graduate students spend learning a critical vocabulary so as to say what might be said much more simply! We take pride in reading the Emperor’s New Prose.

When Denis Dutton was alive, his journal, *Philosophy and Literature*, used to award an annual, unwanted prize to a prominent theorist guilty of especially bad writing. Winning samples exhibited the worst characteristics of contemporary theory—jargon, obscurity, pretension, vatic tone—in a dose so high as to reach what Dutton called “intellectual kitsch.” Homi Bhabha and Judith Butler shared, unasked,

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6 For more on Dutton’s contest, and similar competitions in badness, see the
the 1998 award, so one can see that Dutton did not choose obscure people as exemplars of obscure writing. These are not mute inglorious Miltons. Butler’s prize-winning passage reads:

The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.7

I do understand this passage, but I wonder if that is a good thing. How many graduate students imagine that by mastering arcane language, and even learning to compose in it, they have actually accomplished something! And how many undergraduates, asked to read material like this, have decided to take a discipline whose complex terminology actually has precise meaning, like organic chemistry.

The Book of Proverbs tells us that wisdom “crieth without; she uttereth her voice in the streets” (Proverbs 1:20)—in the streets perhaps, but not in Crowe Hall!

To acquire wisdom, students ask—naively, we say—“what the author is saying.” Perhaps professionalism explains why for almost a century we have developed one theory after another denying that the author’s intentions, or authors themselves, matter. And yet, I know no one who reads without presuming the opposite. As with any communication, one has to assume it is constructed to effect a purpose, which implies human design.

Even if we know there is no single designer, as with epic poems that are the product of a long tradition, we posit a fictive author who sums up the tradition. We pretend there was such a person as “Homer.” Otherwise, the work would not be a work at all, only a series

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7 Cited by Dutton from Butler’s “Further Reflections on the Conversations of Our Time,” from *Diacritics* (1997), http://denisdutton.com/bad_writing.htm.
of pointless inscriptions. We have no choice but to posit authorship because, as with any communication, that is the only way to make it mean something. The author can be the unconscious, use disguises, and produce something resembling dreams as Freud describes them, but we must still personify this unconscious as an author with a purpose, as Freud does. Otherwise the dream would be precisely what he says it is not, a series of random physiological responses with no overall logical connection. He calls his book *The Interpretation of Dreams* to indicate that dreams are meaningful artifacts that, unlike mere neurological discharges, warrant interpretation.

The *Cliffs Notes* Test

No author, no point. But if there is a point, why not simply state it? If what *Bleak House* says can be summed up in a paragraph, why not just read the summary? In fact, students often do make their way through required literature courses by reading a plot-and-message summary. If one cannot give a coherent reason why that won’t do, then why should the student assume anything important is left out? The professor has to pass what might be called the *Cliff’s Notes* test.

Just as assigning theory in beginning courses conveys a message about the dispensability of literature, so syllabi can suggest that, whatever might be affirmed publically, *Cliff’s Notes* is good enough. Many years ago, when student course evaluations were published in printed form, I remember coming across responses to a course on Dickens. One comment at first amused me: “Don’t take this course unless you want to read a lot of Dickens!” It seemed like an inane thing to say until I grasped what the student meant. The class assigned a Dickens novel a week to be discussed in two lectures. The first was devoted to Dickens’s life and the other to the social conditions of the time. So much reading, with so little understanding of the work! It obviously made no difference whether one read *Bleak House* or *Cliff’s Notes* (or nothing at all).

Even courses that do discuss the text defeat themselves when they assign a long novel a week. It is impossible for anyone but a highly accomplished reader with an empty schedule to read *Anna Karenina*, *Our Mutual Friend*, or *Middlemarch* attentively in a week. When professors ask students to do the impossible, they are in effect winking at shortcuts. And if one is not going to pay attention to each sentence, why *not* read the summary?
Three Ways to Kill a Novel

1. Execution by Technique

My informal survey suggests that very few students have taken high school or college literature classes that inspire further reading. Instruction kills interest in three main ways.

The most common approach might be called *technical*. It involves mastering a set of terms and methods to apply to any text. It is a sort of pre-theory.

Who is the protagonist, and who is the antagonist? Does the story have a narrator? Where is the denouement? Is there foreshadowing? Above all, this approach directs students to look for symbols and allegories. It is easy enough to discover Christ symbols. How many crosses or crossroads appear in *Crime and Punishment*! Water symbolism can almost always be found, since someone sooner or later will wash, drink, or see a lake or river. In *Huckleberry Finn* the Mississippi symbolizes freedom, while the Widow Douglas’s house symbolizes civilization. In *Anna Karenina*, trains symbolize fate. Or modernization. Or the “transports” of love. Frou-Frou symbolizes Anna.

This approach can take a more sophisticated form. The teacher then is sure to speak not of “the work” but of “the text,” that is, the words on the page and how they are woven together. It is as if “work” were what laymen said, while we professionals speak of “text.” But in fact there is a crucial distinction between the two, the same one that Bakhtin drew between sentences and utterances. Someone has to say an utterance to some real or potential listener for some reason. In an utterance, someone is trying to *do* something. If one imagines what Tolstoy and Austen were up to, one realizes immediately that they aimed to create not sentences, but an utterance using sentences, and, by the same token, not a text but a work.

If so, then the critic or student must first experience the *work* as a sensitive reader. Only then can he or she begin to analyze that experience and how it is created. The *text* is a tool for creating the experience, but unless one has the experience in the first place, one cannot analyze

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8 Caryl Emerson and I discuss Bakhtin’s theory of language, and the significance of this distinction, in chapter four of *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).
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it. One might as well confuse a building with its blueprint, and imagine that living in the blueprint will keep out the rain.

Students need to have such experiences, and not just be told of their results. It is crucial for them to see how one arrives at the interpretation and to live through that process. Otherwise, why not just memorize some critic’s interpretation?

Some two decades ago I gave a series of lectures in Norway, where a theoretically sophisticated version of the textual approach reigned. One prominent scholar replied to my Anna Karenina paper by observing: “All my career I have been telling students not to do what you have done, that is, treat characters as real people with real problems and real human psychology. Characters in a novel are so many formal features, nothing more than words on a page. It is primitive to treat fictional people as real, as primitive as the spectator who rushed on stage to stay the hand of Judas.” Well, if that is what she was teaching students, she was teaching them wrong. Characters in a novel are neither words on a page nor real people: they are possible people. When we think of their ethical dilemmas, we do not need to imagine that such people exist, only that such people and such dilemmas could exist.

But if we did not blind ourselves with professional notions, wouldn’t it be obvious that we react to novelistic heroines as possible people? The “Judas” comment, which I first heard in so many words from a Jakobsonian instructor in graduate school, is a red herring. It is designed, like the Norwegian scholar’s question, to allow only two alternatives, real people or textual features, and not the one we all intuitively know, people that are not real but could be. Readers who mistake theatre for reality are vanishingly rare, but almost everyone is moved by characters they know to be fictional. We never imagine searching archives for records confirming events in the lives of Anna Karenina or Dorothea Brooke, but we do wonder what we would do in their circumstances. Would we wonder about being in the circumstances of words on a page?

When students place themselves in a character’s position, or recall they have been in a similar one, the last thing one wants to do is to tell them not to be so unsophisticated. It is obvious that George Eliot and Tolstoy did not have to work so hard to reproduce the way real people think, unless readers were meant to imagine people who really could exist. Students who imagine being such people are accepting the invitation the author and work extend. That is where the process of caring about works might well begin.
2. Death by Judgment

Somewhat less common is the approach that demands moral and social judgment. One faults or excuses author, character, or the society depicted according to the moral and social standards prevalent today, by which I mean those standards shared by professional interpreters of literature.

“If only divorce laws had been more enlightened, Anna Karenina would not have had such a hard time!” And if she had shared our views about (whatever the current consensus is discussing), she would have been so much wiser. Somewhere in a Solzhenitsyn novel there is a character who wonders why she has to read Tolstoy, Turgenev and the other Russian classics when they make ideological errors that today any twelve-year-old can identify. I asked one of my students who said she had never enjoyed reading literature what books she had been assigned, and she mentioned *Huckleberry Finn*. Pondering how to kill a book as much fun as that, I asked how it had been taught. She explained: “We learned it shows that slavery is wrong.”

In this approach, the works of the past illuminate how far people have come or, perhaps, how much ahead of their time some writers were. The more they shared our beliefs, the better they were. Of course, numerous critical schools that judge or exonerate literary works are more sophisticated than that class on *Huck Finn*, but they all make the same mistake of presuming the correctness of one’s own views and then measuring others against them. By its very nature, that stance makes it impossible to do anything but verify what one already believes. Students recognize very quickly that such reading is an elaborate form of self-compliment.

In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy writes of historians who judge figures of the past:

In describing the part played by these historical personages who, in their opinion, caused what they call *the reaction*, the historians severely condemn them. All the famous people of that period, from Aleksandr and Napoleon to Madame de Staël, Photius, Schelling, Chateaubriand, Fichte, and the rest, pass before their stern tribunal and are acquitted or condemned according to whether they promoted *progress* or *reaction*…. In what does the substance of these strictures consist? It consists in the fact that a historic character like Aleksandr … did not have the same conception of the welfare of humanity fifty years ago as a present-day professor who from his youth has been occupied
with learning, that is, with reading books, listening to lectures, and making notes (W&P, 1351-1353).

Just as one’s own actions are “prudent” while the same actions performed by one’s enemy are “cowardly,” so “reactionary” is what our opponents are and “progress” is what we are trying to achieve. But unless one holds the highly dubious belief that History (with a capital H) has an inevitable direction, the word “progress” means nothing more than “what we believe.” Who does not desire “progress”? Who wants things to get worse?

La Rochefoucauld remarked that “everyone complains of his memory but no one complains of his judgment” (LaR, 49). We may forget some fact, but we know our beliefs are right. Wisdom, however, entails imagining how the argument looks from the other side, that is, without presuming that the other person is venal, ignorant, malicious, or stupid, at least any more than one is oneself. For much the same reasons, it is puerile to summon Shakespeare, Milton, Austen, and Tolstoy before the stern tribunal of comp lit professors. Why not imagine what valid criticisms these authors would advance if they could see us?

Us. When I say “us,” I do not mean all those other people of our society who do not share the views of Those Who Analyze Texts. When Intellectuals condemn what is wrong with “us,” they usually mean Americans without postgraduate degrees. It’s a strange use of the first person plural that excludes the first person singular and perhaps a few others. We need a new grammatical category—let’s call it “the self-excluding we.” By the way, the “self-excluding we” exists elsewhere, for example, when parents talk to young children: “We’re having a little diarrhea today, aren’t we?”

Ambrose Bierce defined “egotist” as “a person of low taste and bad morals, who thinks more of himself than he does of me.” He might have added that when we say others are “in denial,” we usually mean that they obstinately refuse to believe what we do.

One has to allow other perspectives to show the limitations of our own. Otherwise, one cannot learn anything and literature easily

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9 And in the present essay.

10 So I remember the line that in my edition of Bierce reads: “a person of low taste, more interested in himself than in me.” DD, 52.
becomes pointless. But if one engages in a real dialogue, new insights can emerge.

3. Murder by Document

One can kill a work a third way: treat the literary work as a document of its time. “The author didn’t write in a vacuum, you know!” Dostoevsky shows us what urban life was like in nineteenth-century Russia. Dickens depicts the deplorable conditions of workers of his time. True enough, but a factory inspector’s report might do even better.

The problem with this approach is that it puts the cart before the horse. One does not read Dostoevsky to learn about nineteenth-century Russia, one becomes interested in Russian history from reading its classics. After all, every culture has many periods, and one can’t be interested in every period of every culture, so the argument about nineteenth-century Russia is bound to fail except with people already interested in Russian history.

What makes a work literary is that it is interesting (or meant to be interesting) to people who do not care about its original context. Of course, with any work one could reconstruct the exchange between author and original audience, and it might even be helpful to do so, but what makes the work literature worth reading is what goes beyond that. Dostoevsky illuminates psychological and moral problems that are still pertinent, even outside Russia!

In each of these approaches—the technical, judgmental, and documentary—true things are said. Works do indeed use symbols, they can show us slavery is wrong, and they illuminate their times. The problem is what these approaches do not achieve: they fail to give a reason for reading literature.

Application

Is there something one can learn from literature one cannot learn as well or better elsewhere? Actually, there are numerous things, as numerous and various as the genres of literature and the geniuses who have written in them. Since many of the greatest minds around the world have written literature, the very fact that such a question needs to be asked suggests that we have strayed far off track.

I remember as a graduate student hearing that critics no longer believe that Proust is sugar-coated Bergson. I was surprised to learn
they ever had. Why would we ever have needed Proust at all in such a case, since we already had Bergson, who is, after all, a lot easier to read? To my surprise, the explanation for the change in critical opinion had nothing to do with the source of my surprise. It was simply that no one cared about Bergson any more.

Then, as now, a great deal of Dostoevsky criticism discovered in his novels an exemplification of Russian Orthodox theology. These readings have always seemed forced to me—Dostoevsky was too shaky in his faith and heterodox in his views—but a more important problem with such criticism presents itself. If this were true, who would need Dostoevsky? Most readings of Tolstoy’s fiction also disappointed me because, if they were correct, he simply wove a nice story about some ideas more clearly enunciated in Copleston’s history of philosophy.

In all such approaches, the critic apparently knows everything the author had to say and more. If an author’s work conveys Kantian or Hegelian ideas, the critic detects them and thereby determines its meaning. Beyond the sources, the critic has also mastered, as the author could not have, what more recent thinkers have said about the same issues. The critic can read Heidegger and his expositors. Tolstoy’s narrative may have made these issues more easily graspable, but so would Heidegger for Dummies. If that is all Tolstoy has to offer, who needs him?

When critics approach literature with a theoretical method, they can usually explicate meanings beyond the author’s awareness. Since such critics evidently know more than the authors they discuss, the question again arises: why read Trollope when one can read critical theory applied to him? Take this as a rule of thumb: whenever a critic speaks of “applying” a theory, something has gone badly wrong. All those introductions to graduate studies that apply a theory a week to a given “text” go a long way toward making their subject matter dispensable.

The work subject to “application” becomes merely an illustration of how the theory works, sort of like a patient with a toothache brought in to show the dentist’s skill. Students are smart enough to know that in this model, one patient is as good as another. There will always be someone to cure, and what is important is the technique of curing. One studies dentistry, not patientry.

Perhaps this model owes a debt to the view variously espoused in Plato, the romantics, and several more recent schools, that poets
do not understand their own works but serve as mere transmitters of truths beyond their ken. It is obvious that this tradition can picture the writer as a mere “scriptor,” rather than author, through whose pen social forces reveal themselves. So does the classic Marxist idea of the “superstructure” and “the base,” with a writer unwittingly expressing the economic interests of a social class.

From theory to theory many things change, but the structural place reserved for the critic remains. He sees more deeply while unmasking disguises to show what is really going on. Is it any wonder that critics find such a role agreeable? You might as well be startled that priests embrace their indispensable role in saving souls.

**Novelistic Discoveries**

But is it possible, as naïve readers suppose, that a great work contains wisdom exceeding any theory? Could it be the case that writers are wiser and deeper than critics? What if it would be more sensible to regard Bergson as watered-down Proust, rather than the reverse?

And perhaps unprofessional readers and other authors are correct when they judge Tolstoy an especially keen observer of other people and of his own mind? What if the strikingly realistic sense of his works, on which readers constantly remark, reflects his strikingly fine perception leading to discoveries about how people think? Then it would no longer be difficult to understand why one should study Tolstoy. The philosophers he read would not already contain his ideas but would have served as catalysts of his discoveries.

Bakhtin insisted that such discoveries indeed belong to great authors, major works, and important genres. For this reason, I have been arguing for decades that, if one defines “theory” by what has prevailed in America in recent decades, then Bakhtin is the great anti-theorist. I first became attracted to his thought when I read him in preparation for writing my dissertation about Dostoevsky. I was immediately struck that he had not so much interpreted Dostoevsky according to a theory but had derived various theories from attentive reading of Dostoevsky. His book seemed less a critical interpretation than a work of philosophy inspired by Dostoevsky.

I admire Bakhtin for resisting the temptation to place himself above the writers he discusses. He imagines his work as a stab at paraphrasing, so far as that is possible, the profundity of Dostoevsky’s
and Rabelais’s “artistic thinking.” By “artistic thinking” Bakhtin means not thinking about art but thinking in the form of art.

Bakhtin supposes that Dostoevsky’s ideas are so elusive, and yet so valuable, that a good explication, however unequal to the masterpieces explicated, can tell the reader something important and otherwise unavailable. That is the approach I take in my classes.

And so, when I see Bakhtin himself made into a method to “apply,” I grow disheartened. As there are schools of feminism and post-colonialism, so there is now “dialogism.” Literary works are evaluated—no surprise—by how well they live up to the school’s “dialogic” standards.

In his unfinished book on the novel of education, Bakhtin contends that when we presume writers fictionalize philosophers we forget that sometimes philosophers “tractify” fiction. The novelists often make the discoveries that the discursive thinkers “transcribe.” To cite Bakhtin’s example, a commonplace of intellectual history holds that eighteenth-century thought lacked a historical sense, which is largely true if one is thinking of philosophers. But eighteenth-century novels began the process of representing people not by fixed qualities but by processes of change. They pioneered an “image of man” as always becoming: people alter over time in complex interactions with each other and with society, which, in turn, also “becomes.” Having come to see people this way, novels arrived at new insights about psychology, morality, and values. Nineteenth-century novels took these insights still further to develop what Bakhtin considered the richest sense of people ever conceived.

To be sure, nineteenth-century philosophers and essayists also wrote important treatises devoted to these themes. But it would often be more accurate to say that they were teasing out the implications of novelistic discoveries than that novelists were sugar-coating the ideas of philosophers. In many cases the novelists were far ahead and, indeed, remain unequaled.

A Proof

There is an obvious proof that the great novelists knew more about human psychology than any social scientist who ever lived. If psychologists, sociologists, or economists understood people as well as George Eliot or Tolstoy, they could create portraits of people as
believable as Dorothea Brooke or Anna Karenina. But no social scientist has ever come close.

To be sure, the new behavioral economics, with which students are often familiar, has claimed to have overcome the shallowness of traditional rational choice economics. One would think they could hardly miss, but they do. Read behavioral economists or popular syntheses, like that of Dan Ariely, and you will encounter portraits of decision-making so breathtakingly shallow that one can only sigh.\(^{11}\) Ariely has started giving advice on love relationships grounded in behavioral economics.\(^{12}\)

At least rational choice economists, at their best, do not claim that real people of flesh and blood actually think according to their model. They often cite Milton Friedman’s classic article from the early 1950s, “The Methodology of Positive Economics,” which argues that the test of a good model is not whether it is psychologically realistic.\(^{13}\) The test, rather, is whether the model, positing that people acting “as if” certain simplifying assumptions were true, yields reliable predictions of collective economic behavior (Friedman, 40). If that is what they claim, one can fault them only on their predictive accuracy. Those who make no claims about psychology cannot be wrong about it. Unfortunately, many traditional economists forget this “as if,” while

\(^{11}\) See PI. Another good survey is Hugh Schwartz, A Guide to Behavioral Economics (Alexandria, Virginia: Higher Education Publications, 2008).

\(^{12}\) A reader writes to Ariely that his six-year love relationship is not as thrilling as it used to be but just “comfortable.” In that case, Ariely replies, “I suspect that what has emerged is not sufficiently beneficial for you—and given this, I would say get out. As the economist Tibor Scitovsky argued in ‘The Joyless Economy,’ there are two kinds of experiences, pleasures and comforts, and we have a tendency to take the comfortable, safe and predictable path way too often. This is particularly sad, Scitovsky argues, because real progress comes from pleasures. It comes from taking risks and trying very different things. So, perhaps this is a good opportunity to give up your comfort and give pleasure a chance.” I quote extensively so the reader will not suspect a paraphrase is exaggerated. See Dan Ariely, “The Don’t-Let-It-in-the-House Diet: A Behavioral Economist Tackles Readers’ Dilemmas,” in the Life and Style section of The Wall Street Journal, August 3, 2012, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390443687504577563133964708876.html?mod=googlenews_wsj.

\(^{13}\) Milton Friedman, “The Method of Positive Economics,” in Essays in Positive Economics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 3-43.
behavioral economics is based on such claims. Their models bear as much resemblance to real people as a point bears to a three-dimensional object.

**Novels as Thought Experiments**

We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!

—Wittgenstein

While behavioral economists rely on simplified “laboratory experiments,” philosophers sometimes construct thought experiments. Thought experiments boast an impressive history. They have played significant roles in the sciences (Galileo’s on falling objects, Einstein’s elevator, Schrödinger’s cat) and the philosophy of mind (a recent example is Searle’s Chinese room).

These experiments persuade by simplification: they abstract essential features from a situation so we can perceive their implications more clearly. Contradictions may become visible, logical consequences apparent, or concealed assumptions bared. But clearly, they can persuade only insofar as they do not omit what is essential to the question under consideration.

Galileo made his remarkable discoveries by abstraction: if irrelevant “noise,” such as friction, could be thought away, how would bodies fall? He presumed, and turned out to be right, that in physics

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14 On thought experiments, see the article “Thought Experiments,” 2011 version, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/thought-experiment/; Roy Sorenson, *Thought Experiments* (New York: Oxford University press, 1992); Thomas S. Kuhn, “A Function for Thought Experiments,” in *The Essential Tension* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 240–265; and James Robert Brown, *The Laboratory of the Mind: Thought Experiments in the Natural Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1993). For an excellent critique of philosophers’ use of thought experiments, see Kathleen V. Wilkes, *Real People: Personal Identity without Thought Experiments* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).
the complexity of the world conceals simple laws underneath. But does that mean this assumption applies everywhere?

Contrast Galileo’s simplifying assumption about physics with Carl von Clausewitz’s classic account of war. Clausewitz describes the supposedly scientific, “Galilean” theories of war that have been formulated by abstraction. Generals who believe these theories lose. The reason is that such accounts abstract out the essence of war, what must be recognized if one is to understand it. That essence includes everything that from a Galilean perspective constitutes mere noise. Clausewitz explains:

If one has never personally experienced war, one cannot understand in what the difficulties really consist, nor why a commander should need brilliance and exceptional ability. Everything looks simple; the knowledge required does not look remarkable, the strategic options are so obvious that by comparison the simplest problem of higher mathematics has an impressive scientific dignity. Once war has actually been seen, the difficulties become clear; but it is still extremely hard to describe the unseen, all-pervading element that brings about this change of perspective.\textsuperscript{15}

Tolstoy was to call this unseen element “the elemental force,” and the crucial point about it is that it is not a single thing but a way to refer to countless small forces that are constantly present and render all simple theories ludicrous. The generals in War and Peace follow just the sort of theories Clausewitz discredits—Clausewitz briefly appears in Tolstoy’s book—in the belief that they have a “science of war.” When they lose, they dismiss the interfering factors as mere chance, of no interest to a scientific theory. By contrast, Tolstoy’s wisest generals, Kutuzov and Bagration, know that such “chance” is what war is all about.

Prince Andrei begins by believing in a science of war and eventually learns that there can be none, because battle is a matter of “a hundred million diverse chances.” Good generals, he realizes, have not the right abstraction but the practiced ability, based on experience, to react appropriately to situations no theory could anticipate.

\textsuperscript{15} Carl von Clausewitz, On War, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 119.
Or, as Clausewitz explains, “Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult. The difficulties accumulate and end by producing a kind of friction that is inconceivable unless one has experienced war” (Clausewitz, 117). For Galileo, friction is what must be thought away, while for Clausewitz it names what must be retained. Thought experiments relying on abstracting out the friction will therefore be of little use in understanding war or any other aspect of human life where friction is essential.

Clausewitz describes in general terms the many sorts of factors that produce friction, including weather, terrain, organizational snafus, accidents of countless sorts, and, crucially, moral factors. Under this term he includes the unforeseeable complexities of individual psychology, the effect of danger and terror, and many other emotions for which the soldier’s earlier life has offered little preparation. Tolstoy’s generals realize the important of morale, which cannot be formalized. Social factors of the most varied sort also make a difference.

The more friction matters, the more abstraction—on which thought experiments depend—will falsify. Such abstraction proves a useful tool in ethics only if one imagines ethical decisions as made, or as properly made, in abstract logical space. Thought experiments could then apply as well to Martians as to humans, to Muslims as to Presbyterians, to thirteenth-century French noblemen as to contemporary factory workers in Mississippi. The subtle psychological differences of individual people also should not matter.

Tolstoy was familiar with this sort of thought experiment. In Anna Karenina, Sergei Ivanovich tries to prove an ethical point by asking what Levin would do in a hypothetical situation. He thus tries to prove a moral point by a deftly constructed thought experiment. Levin properly replies that he would have to decide what to do when in that situation. This is the correct answer, for only then he could take into account all those factors the thought experiment abstracts out. This is another reason that, in ethics, presentness matters.

All such ethical thought experiments tacitly presume that the complexities of people as social and psychological beings can be bracketed to get at the essence of the matter. To the extent that ethics demands an understanding of what cannot be modeled in logical space—to the extent that it inescapably involves friction—thought experiments will mislead. Friction is not mere friction.

Ethics is a matter of prosaics. But what if the thought experiment included the prosaic details? Could one not construct
a thought experiment showing people in their psychic complexity, their history, the climate of their minds, their values both recognized and unrecognized, their habitual way of perceiving others and the immediate considerations occupying their attention when a decision is being made? What if it also showed each person’s relations, and potential relations, with the others, the course of their thoughts, the questions they mentally pose to themselves and imagine posing to others? It might also place people in their society with its many conflicts, complexities, and oddities, as they change at different rates. And could it not show the shifting ethical norms of changing groups, and anything else that might be pertinent?

In fact, we have such thought experiments. They are called realist novels.

When students learn to read novels this way, their relevance is apparent. Everyone makes ethical decisions in situations that call for a deep, rich, and prosaic understanding.

**Self-Deception in Philosophy and the Novel**

When I was writing my book on *Anna Karenina*, I became fascinated with the complex dynamics of self-deception dramatized by Tolstoy. Anyone who knows the realist novel will recognize self-deception as a recurring theme. For novelists, we are not just what we think and remember, but also what we avoid thinking and remembering; and not just what we happen to misperceive, but also what we choose to misperceive. “Pride and prejudice” lead us to see one thing rather than another, to draw a less than plausible conclusion, and to justify to ourselves what we know we ought to condemn. All Jane Austen’s novels deal with this theme, and it rapidly became a trademark concern of the genre.

Discovering that philosophers have recently taken an interest in self-deception, I turned to their work. The problem troubled them because it raised some obvious “paradoxes,” as they like to say. How can one lie to oneself, when, after all, the self lied to is the same self that does the lying and knows the truth? Isn’t self-deception a bit like concealing something in one’s pocket so another person cannot find it and then imagining that the same ruse can work on oneself?

But what if (some philosophers suggest) self-deception refers to the holding of two contradictory beliefs whose contradiction the believer has not noticed? Or is that not really what we mean by self-
deception? “Let us begin by supposing,” writes Herbert Fingarette, “that the circumstances, evidence, or argument favouring a certain belief are presented to Jones, who holds a contrary belief.” But the argument is so complex that Jones does not recognize the contradiction, or he is too dull to do so. It would then be wrong, contends Fingarette, to speak of self-deception.

Fingarette is right about that. We hold countless beliefs and the sheer limitations of time and attention prevent us from assessing each in relation to all the others, so there may well be conflicts, but that is not what we mean by self-deception. In some way, self-deception must involve agency, a willingness not to see a contradiction or to recognize what one would rather not recognize. It requires some sort of effort.

Perhaps Fingarette and the philosophers he examines go astray with the reference to figures like “Jones.” Jones, as the name suggests, is no one in particular. Jones has no biography or social connections. He is an entirely different sort of being from Ivan Karamazov or Anna Karenina. Jones does not develop over time. As with behavioral economists’ examples, this one works by considering an abstract agent at a moment; in this case, a moment in which self-deception does or does not occur. But people do not live in a moment. They live processually. That is why novels are long.

Perhaps Jones does not hold a contrary belief; perhaps he is simply afraid of a threat to something he believes. Often enough, contrary evidence does not register because, as the possible contradiction is being approached, alarm bells go off and deflect one’s attention. Those alarm bells result from years of handling disturbing information about quite other topics, mental habits that operate without any choice at the moment in question but which are still the result of choices in the past. The choice to self-deceive is not located at a single moment. No example about a person without a biography could grasp such an example.

Suppose Jones wants to avoid having his beliefs disconfirmed and so makes sure he associates only with people who tell him what he wants to hear and gradually loses “the capacity to see through this. Even in such a case,” Fingarette contends, “I do not think we would say that such a person deceived himself. He has knowingly put himself in a position where he can be deceived, but he is not deceiving himself”

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16 Herbert Fingarette, *Self-Deception* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 22. The book makes a number of interesting distinctions.
(Fingarette, 31). But placing ourselves, time and again, in situations in which the conclusion one wants to reach can be effortlessly drawn is precisely how we often deceive ourselves.

Anna Karenina wants to have an affair, which she believes to be morally wrong, because it is bound to hurt her husband and cause injury to her son. If she could arrange to believe that she is not hurting her husband—say, because he does not care about anything but social proprieties or because he is incapable of feeling anything at all—then she need not blame herself for hurting him. If she could only start to find him so repulsive that she simply cannot live with him, then she has no choice and is again not to blame. I shorten the list of beliefs she would like to arrive at. They are consistent neither with what she knows nor with each other.

The problem is, she knows that her husband can suffer, does love her, and would be tortured by jealousy. She cannot will herself to believe the opposite just because it would be convenient to do so. If she tried, the falsehood would be apparent to her. She therefore does what most of us do.

At any given moment, we can perceive a situation in a range of ways, shaded one way or another, but none palpably untrue. One can focus on one end of this range without a sense of lying. Self-deception often begins with such a choice of focus. Looking is an action we can perform in many ways. Since we have occasion to look at every moment of our lives, we have the choice to be generous or cruel, broad- or narrow-minded, at every prosaic moment.

Readers watch Anna choosing to focus on what presents her husband as less feeling and less vulnerable. Over time, the perception that lies at one extreme of plausibility moves to the center, and her attention switches to a new extreme and still less charitable view. Eventually, over many months and countless moments of looking, she succeeds in seeing him as she wishes, although there are moments when contrary evidence can get through.17

I have presented what Tolstoy describes over hundreds of pages much too schematically. Because novels allow us to get inside a character’s mind, hear how she speaks to herself in inner speech, and detect the objecting voices she implicitly answers, we become familiar with Anna’s mental actions. We witness the complex dynamics of self-

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17 I discuss self-deception in *Anna Karenina* in SMW.
Chapter 7. Novelistic Empathy, and How to Teach It

deception as it develops, overcomes obstacles, avoids evidence, and addresses the possible objections of other people she knows. We see her precarious developing beliefs unsettled by unwelcome memories from the remote past. Sometimes when her husband behaves uncharacteristically, he can unwittingly take her by surprise, and contrary to her desires she feels for him. Then she has to expend extra effort to talk herself out of what she sees, and each expenditure of effort tacitly reminds her of her falsity. Tolstoy both traces this process in detail and explicitly comments on it as it is happening.

Anna’s self-deception includes choices extended over many moments but not wholly present at any single one. It involves a variety of mental actions pertaining to memory, perception, the course of thoughts when they wander, and many other prosaic inner gestures happening at countless moments every day. All these combine into a rich picture showing how people arrange to believe what they know to be untrue.

Indeed, what it means “to believe” also shifts. There are evidently shades of belief that hold unbelief of different kinds in check. Even the distinction between conscious and unconscious actions comes to seem far too simple. These are the sort of things one cannot show in a brief example about “Jones.”

For some reason, philosophers do not turn to these novels. I find it strange: here we have what by common consent are the most convincing portraits of people ever written. These portraits offer plausible descriptions of the internal mental processes we never see in others and have trouble noticing in ourselves. They focus on the very problem under discussion. And yet, philosophers do not turn to them. It is as if they examined poverty by careful analysis of the word “poor” while a great slum lay outside their window.

Once students learn to trace Anna’a thoughts, and watch for similar mental activities of their own, they recognize the value of novelistic accounts of self-deception. And the same happens with many other habits, choices, and issues that confront them daily.

**Identification and Empathy**

Philosophers can teach us that we ought to empathize with others. Anthropologists and sociologists recommend understanding the perspectives of distant cultures, while historians do the same for past centuries. But these disciplines do not involve actual practice in
empathy. Great literature does, and in that respect its study remains unique among university-taught subjects.

When one reads a novel, one identifies with characters. In so doing, one experiences from within what it is like to be a member of the opposite sex, belong to another social class, work in an unfamiliar profession, live in a different society, or take other assumptions and values for granted. One experiences feelings and perspectives that one either knew about only by hearsay or never even suspected.

And one does not do so a single time. One does not have to have finished reading *Anna Karenina* to see the world from the perspective of an upper-class nineteenth-century Russian woman. Rather, in the course of reading page after page one finds oneself feeling what she feels in reaction to new circumstances, other people, unexpected memories, and earlier feelings.

One does the same with the other major characters. Upon reflection, the best definition of “major character in a novel” might be a character whom readers are allowed to experience from within. *Anna Karenina* gives us an astonishing number of major characters. And so we have constant practice in seeing the world from new perspectives and grasping what it is to be a different person.

Readers practice empathy. And what one practices, one finds easier to do and, eventually, does by habit. It becomes second nature.

Time and again, the author lets us overhear, as we never could in life, the character’s thoughts, often in the very words and voice the character uses when silently addressing herself. No wonder readers speak of characters as if they were old friends and of completing a novel as a farewell. Readers know, of course, that characters are only fictional, but at the same time, they get to know them intimately, in some ways more intimately than flesh-and-blood friends. We eavesdrop on their consciousness and co-feel their private feelings.

To enable this eavesdropping, the realist novel developed its greatest formal innovation: the extended use of what some have called “free indirect discourse” or what Bakhtin named “double-voiced discourse.” Narration of a passage remains in the third person, but the perspective, choice of words, and sequence of thoughts reflect the character’s inner speech. And so the passage carries all the emotional charge the character experiences. As the character’s emotion alters in the course of thinking, readers can trace its evolution. They are present, feeling along with the character, in a way not possible in any other discipline or cultural artifact.
What literature generally and novels in particular are good for is an education in the skills of empathy.

**Living Into and Simultaneous Regret**

I recall several years ago reading Edith Wharton’s novel *The House of Mirth* and finding in the upper-class, social-climbing, beautiful, antisemitic heroine values I dislike and personal qualities that in life repel me. And yet, as she descended gradually into suicide, I felt intense psychic pain. That is one way I know Wharton is a splendid novelist. I experienced what it was like to be someone like Lily Bart and to undergo her feelings vicariously. I cared about them even when I was disapproving of her behavior and her way of thinking.

The old saw, “to understand is to forgive,” is often taken to mean that if one really understood all the factors behind another person’s decision one would recognize his behavior as inevitable. One sees that if everything were identical, one would behave the same way, and so one would forgive what could not be otherwise and what one would do oneself.

That is not the sense of novelistic empathy. Tolstoy enables me to sense what it is like to be Anna Karenina, to experience in part what her despair feels like. My own pain traces the extent of my identification. But I can empathize without justifying or forgiving. Sensing another consciousness from within allows me to see why I might, not necessarily would, behave the same way.

To really sense another person from within is to sense that person’s choices. Inevitability is a category that can only be applied from without. From within, the most important thing about any person is that he senses more than one possible future, depending on what he chooses. He retains the capacity to surprise others and himself. He remains, as Bakhtin would say, unfinalizable.

One’s own time is always open. And so empathy, far from leading to a sense of inevitability, creates an enhanced sense of the palpability of choice. When a character behaves badly, the reader who identifies with her experiences the pain of simultaneous regret.

Regret can be simultaneous, rather than happen after the fact, because empathy is not merging. It entails both identification and the maintenance of an outside position. It is, as Bakhtin explains, a “living into” (*vzhivanie*) another while still being oneself. One feels the other “from inside its own essence” and senses “life in its actual aliveness”
while simultaneously remaining outside. Such “living into” is something I do, and am aware of doing as I do it. When I empathize, I retain “my own unique place…. It is I who empathize actively … empathizing is my act,” an event in my life and an act for which I am responsible. One can therefore regret a choice while empathizing with the person who makes it and experiencing it as it is being made.  

**Experiencing Suicide**

From within Anna’s consciousness, the readers feel the intense pain leading her to suicide. They sense the way her spiteful and self-destructive thoughts feed on themselves, hear the voices suggesting she is overlooking something important, and feel her turning her attention away from the warning. At every moment the reader experiences Anna choosing to continue thinking as she does, and hopes she changes her mind. Even when reading the book for the tenth time, I feel myself telling her not to do it.

After Anna jumps, and is lying on the train tracks an instant before being run over, she realizes she has not been thinking right and regrets her decision. Readers following her thoughts and feelings share the sense of utter agony, share it insofar as they are living into her and acting as co-participants in her act. For Anna, the agony of that brief moment exceeds all the despair leading to her jump. Perhaps she experiences more pain in that instant than in all the rest of her life combined.

Outside a novel, this moment, the most intense of her life, would have to remain invisible and unshared. No one could even tell us about it, much less make us sense it. But our sharing it, through our relationship with Anna that is partly of our own choosing, becomes an event in our own lives. Reading a novel is not just reading about, it is living with.

Guiding the students through this experience constitutes the most effective caution I know against excessive indulgence in suicidal thoughts.

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18 M. M. Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, trans. Vadim Liapunov, ed. Vadim Liapunov and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 14-15.
Subjectivities

From without, everyone else’s actions constitute behavior. Behavior demands explanations in terms of external causes, such as social forces, psychological laws, or, as students today like to add, neurobiological mechanisms. But no one can view himself or herself that way. That, I take it, is the point of the joke about two behaviorists in bed, as one says to the other: “That was great for you, how was it for me?”

The subjectivity of other people’s experiences is not normally accessible to us. We know directly, even if we profess otherwise, that an objective description of the world cannot include everything, because there are subjectivities. At the very least, there is mine. As the philosopher Thomas Nagel puts it, “objectivity is essentially incomplete” because “some things can only be understood from the inside, and access to them will depend on how far our subjective imagination can travel.”19 That imagination can actually travel quite far, if guided by a master like Tolstoy.

We already have some experience in knowing other subjectivities. When we remember our own past experiences—say, what it felt like to be much younger—we both inhabit and stand outside that experience. We feel what it was like, and feel what it is now like to feel what it was like. Great novels help us do the same with other people as we do with our earlier selves. We sense what it is like to be Anna Karenina while also sensing what it is like to identify with Anna Karenina.

And we watch her doing what we do: recalling, sometimes unwillingly, what it used to feel like to be her. Anna looks back, remembers, regrets, apologizes. When she believes she is dying in childbirth, she brings to mind what it was like to love and respect her husband. She recognizes how she has deliberately forgotten those feelings while telling herself they did not exist, and so she appreciates directly her process of self-deception for what it was. She describes it in terms similar to the ones I used above.

This moment is a complex one, and hard to describe. She feels the earlier feeling, while at the same time re-experiencing the somewhat later feelings of blocking it out. The two moments coexist as separate past moments in her present experience. And we, recalling our different moments of identifications with her in the process of reading,

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19 Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 18.
have a similar sense of feeling layered upon feeling. This is the sort of temporal layering I have never encountered in a philosopher’s thought experiment, but it is what great novels do all the time.

As we vicariously experience the character’s act of remembering many moments, we also re-experience our own feelings at each of those moments of identification with her. We remember our own feelings in experiencing hers. They become part of who we are. We become a person who has lived through Anna’s experience. This grafting of biographies is also something missing from other disciplines.

**Novelistic Morality**

As a genre, realist novels suggest that morality begins with empathy. “Compassion is the chief and perhaps only law of human existence,” Prince Myshkin thinks in *The Idiot*, and he thinks here for the genre (I, 218).

The guiding thought is: “There but for the grace of God go I.” Identifying with characters makes a reader feel: I could easily have been like her, faced what she faces, and suffered what she suffers. Things are only fortuitously otherwise.

As the story goes, this classic saying about empathy belong to John Bradford. Languishing in the Tower of London, he witnessed prisoners led to execution and remarked: “There but for the grace of God goes John Bradford.” And, in fact, he was himself soon martyred. And so the saying, amended to apply to anyone who voices it, carries the sense not only of a near escape but also of future danger. It suggests how close one is to being someone else. And so it teaches us to view others as subjects like ourselves.

Some philosophers insist, as Kant did, that morality has nothing to do with empathy. It entails doing what is right because it is right. The imperative is universal and categorical, and would apply to Martians as well as to human beings if Martians were capable of understanding it. The implicit philosophy of the realist novel maintains the contrary.

In novels, any reliance on abstract rules in place of human feeling is seen as at best naïve and at worst cruel. Decency is a better guide than rationality. The basic plot of the political and philosophical novel—by Turgenev, Eliot, Conrad, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and others—tells the story of a person who believes in an abstraction only to learn both its ludicrous simplicity and its unwitting harm. Morality begins not with
the right philosophical tenet but with the willingness and ability to place oneself in another’s position.

In Part One of *Anna Karenina*, Kitty, who has decided to marry Vronsky, must turn down a proposal her old family friend Levin is about to make. Expecting that Vronsky will also offer to marry her, Kitty experiences a thrilling sense of her own beauty and power. She feels “intense excitement,” a sensation “akin to that of a young man before a battle” (AK, 51). But as she enters the room where Levin awaits her, she switches her point of view and places herself in his position. “And then for the first time the whole thing presented itself in a new, different aspect; only then did she realize that the question did not affect her only—with whom she would be happy, and whom she loved—but that she would have to wound someone whom she liked. And to wound him cruelly” (AK, 52). She feels the hurt she must cause him. This is how we know that Kitty is fundamentally a good person.

I have never heard someone say, “Yes, you only see things from my point of view, why don’t you think of yourself for a change?”

“We are all born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves,” writes the narrator of *Middlemarch*.

Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity, but yet it had been easier to her to imagine to herself how she would devote herself to Mr. Casaubon, and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom, than to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling—an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects—that he had an equivalent center of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference (M, 205).

The feelings and viewpoint of another self *wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects*: that is where novelistic ethics begins and what novels are uniquely good at teaching. The other person has “an equivalent center of self,” much like our own. We must decenter ourselves to place ourselves in that equivalent center, and in reading novels we practice doing so.

**Impersonation**

How does one convey to students this aspect of novels? One cannot just direct attention to the text, because empathy is not a feature of the text, but of readers’ interaction with it. It is part of the *work*. 
Students need not just to learn about empathy but also to engage in it, and recognize themselves engaging in it, as they read. To encourage them, one could ask the sort of question that has long been regarded as unprofessional: do you like this character, and why? Students might write down their impressions as they finish parts of the book. They could then compare later impressions with earlier ones, which tend to be forgotten. Any long novel should be assigned in parts so that students can live with it over time and have the characters’ lives intertwine with their own.

As the term proceeds, one can ask students how their sense of characters has changed. Do they like the character more or less, and why? Do their earlier impressions strike them as naïve? What can they learn about the process of revising their impressions? The real stories of Emma and Pride and Prejudice include the reader, who, after many misjudgments, learns from his or her own misperceptions, much as the heroines do. If one assigns such a novel for a single class, or does not direct students’ attention to their own reactions as they read, one is in effect omitting part of the story. It is like assigning a seriously abridged edition. That is true with realist novels generally.

When lecturing about a novel, I have found it useful to impersonate the author. At the beginning of the course, I announce that the lectures will be given not from my perspective, but from the perspective of the author as I understand him. Should I comment on some recent event or issue, students will be hearing what Dostoevsky or Tolstoy, not I, would say about it.20

Such impersonation demands absorbing the author’s perspective so thoroughly that one can think from within it, and then (as Bakhtin would say) “draw dotted lines” from his concerns to ours. Students hear the author’s voice and sense the rhythms of his thought, and then, when they go back to the book, read it from that perspective. Instead of seeing puzzling words, they hear a voice.

It is therefore crucial to read passages aloud, with the students silently reading along. They learn to hear plays of irony, subtle shifts in

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20 Mark Edmundson describes the objective of interpretation as “to bring the past into the present and to do so in a way that will make the writer’s ghost nod in something like approval. This means operating within the author’s terms, thinking, insofar as it is possible, the writer’s thoughts … inspired ventriloquism,” or what I call “impersonation.” See Mark Edmundson, Why Read? (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004), 53.
tune, and the double-voicing of inner speech. I describe what is going
on, then read the passage so they hear the play of voices. One can also
ask students to imagine what a character not addressed in a sample
of inner speech would say if she could overhear it. How would Dolly
respond if she could hear Stiva attributing his infidelity to the fact that
she is no longer attractive nor interesting, “merely a good mother”? One
can imagine the inner tonalities in inner speech that the work
does not record but invites us to imagine. Whose answers are tacitly
presumed as the character thinks?

One could use such passages as an excuse to teach “theory,”
but that would be a mistake. Rather, students should sense they are
learning how to bring a novel to life. If the work becomes an occasion
to teach the theory, then the course implies that the theory is what
is really interesting. If you teach as I have described, students will
in a sense be learning theory—should they ever read about double-
voicing or free indirect discourse they will recognize the argument—
but their experience will be a thrilling sense of bringing novels alive.
“So this is why people get so much out of Tolstoy!”

At that point, students will not have to take the author’s
greatness on faith. They will sense that greatness and sense themselves
as capable of doing so. Neither will they have to accept the teacher’s
interpretation without seeing how it was arrived at or what other
interpretation might be possible. No one will have to persuade them
why Cliff’s Notes won’t do.

Students will acquire the skill to inhabit the author’s world. Her
perspective becomes one with which they are intimate, and which,
when their own way of thinking leads them to a dead end, they can
temporarily adopt to see if it might help. Novelistic empathy gives
them a diversity of ways of thinking and feeling. They can escape from
the prison house of self.

**Impersonating Characters**

One can also impersonate the novel’s characters. They too offer a di-
versity of voices and points of view on the world. What makes a nove-
list great is, perhaps above all, the ability to bring to life people and
perspectives at odds with her own. Everyone in Disraeli sounds like
Disraeli, but George Eliot gives us a world of different people.

When students can hear characters’ voices and imagine what they
might think when confronted with new situations, those characters
become inhabitants of their world. Their voices and perspectives on life come to live within them.

In one famous scene in *Karamazov*, Fyodor Pavlovich remembers that he was once asked: why do you hate so-and-so so much?, “and he had answered, with his shameless impudence, ‘I’ll tell you. He’s never done me any harm, but I once played a nasty trick on him and I’ve never forgiven him for it.’”

First, you have to read this extraordinary comment aloud in a voice filled with appropriate nastiness, self-display shading into self-humiliation, irony, and wit. If you do it right, students will laugh. Then you have to gloss the line, describe the whole dynamics of guilt that provokes a person to dislike those whom he has harmed. Help them imagine moments when they have witnessed something similar.

Next, point out that although everyone sometimes feels this way, very few admit they do. Most people do not have the “shameless impudence” to say so, even to themselves. Rather, they devise spurious reasons for hating the person they have harmed, and invent injuries that person has done to them. But old Karamazov is in one sense more honest than that. If hypocrisy is “the tribute vice pays to virtue,” then he is not being hypocritical because, as a person with no morals at all, he has no need to pay that tribute. Such “honesty” makes him all the worse. While we all have the nasty reaction he describes, Fyodor Pavlovich makes a principle of it.

You can invent scenarios in which one might hate one’s victim. Make these scenarios prosaic ones which the students can easily imagine, and sometimes they will supply one or two. I remember one student suddenly turning pale and saying aloud, “Oh, my God!”

Ask the students whether, in such a situation, you might dislike the other person less if you found out he had really wronged you. Such questions can make the dynamics of guilt, and of Dostoevskian perverse psychology, into something they know from within, something they have in fact felt and are now aware of: feelings that, after reading Dostoevsky, they can recognize should they feel them again and counteract if they wish.

Finally—and this is a very important step—you tell them: now, this is a line that only Dostoevsky could have written. If you had seen

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21 So I intone it, though it actually ends: “and ever since I have hated him” (BK, 99).
it out of context, and been asked who wrote it, you would know that either Dostoevsky or someone imitating him must be the author. Why is it important to do that?

Because when you can do that with an author, when you can recognize the qualities that make him who he is—the author’s “quiddities”—then he lives within you. When you have a model sentence of the author in mind, you can use it as a catalyst for producing more of them, and the insights that go with them.

The structuralists used to say that English is not every sentence ever spoken in English but every sentence that could be spoken. To know a language is to know its potential, to be able to work with it, to do new things. And that is true of knowing an author or character. The first step to being able to do that, to making another voice live within you, is to recognize it precisely when you see it. First comes recognition, then free imitation.

After a term of Dostoevsky read this way, students can often hear the “Dostoevskian” voice everywhere and recognize it in themselves. They can extend it, juxtapose it with other voices or perspectives, argue with it. They sense their ears and eyes opening. This is what novelistic wisdom feels like.

**Afterword: What Empathy Isn’t**

In his classic essay “On Liberty,” John Stuart Mill famously argued the case for placing oneself in an opponent’s position. “He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that,” Mill advises. Mill finds it odd that people would claim their beliefs are rational when they have not heard objections to them. How does one call people on the other side closed-minded without even knowing what they say?

Mill explains that one does not know the other side’s position by virtue of knowing one’s own side’s characterization of it. One might as well have a trial in which the jury hears only the prosecutor, who presents the defendant’s case as he sees it.

A rational person must bring opposing arguments “into real contact with his own mind” (Mill, 44). To do so, he must make the effort “to hear them from persons who actually believe them; who defend them in earnest, and do their very utmost for them” (Mill, 44). And

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22 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New York: Prometheus, 1986), 43.
one must listen to the most intelligent and well-intentioned persons on the other side, rather than (as the committed typically do) present the most venal and stupid people as all the other side has to offer. Unless the best people on the other side can recognize your paraphrase of their position as accurate, you do not really know it. And if you do not know it, you are the one who thinks irrationally and closes his mind.

Unfortunately, Mill adds, with almost no exceptions the intelligent people he knows “have never thrown themselves into the mental position of those who think differently from them, and considered what such persons may have to say: and consequently they do not, in any proper sense of the word, know the doctrine which they themselves profess” (Mill, 44). The mental position of those who think differently: Mill is talking about intellectual empathy. One needs to be able not just to recite opposing opinions but also to feel from within why a person who is intelligent and well-intentioned—no less so than oneself—would believe them.

Novels extend Mill’s point from political and intellectual arguments to emotional and personal ones. They deal with other people in all the complex ways we encounter them. They enable us to put ourselves in the emotional, as well as intellectual, position of other people. Readers sense what it feels like to think differently not just about abstract ideas, but also about the most prosaic realities.

In fact, novels assess ideas, too, in terms of what it feels like to believe them. They examine how the ideas fit into a whole personality, way of living, or experience of social life. Experience, not dialectics, teaches Bazarov, Lydgate, and Ivan Karamazov the limitations of their beliefs. And readers learn (as one character in Dostoevsky puts it) to “feel ideas.”

By inviting readers to inhabit the perspectives of other people, novels show how differences of every sort appear to both (or where appropriate all) sides. I sometimes ask students to look forward. Someday you may quarrel with your spouse and find yourself wondering how he or she could think such a thing. But wouldn’t it be worthwhile to place yourself in your spouse’s position and grasp the perspective that makes him or her ask the same question about you? If you could each comprehend the other’s incomprehension, you would have made progress. Students appreciate that when novels teach us to do this, they are teaching us lessons of importance to their lives.

Just as it is disheartening to hear people unable to paraphrase opponents’ arguments dismissing them as closed-minded, so it is
disappointing to read people condemning stick-figure versions of others for their lack of empathy. It is all too easy to hate others for being hateful or to dehumanize them as incapable of empathy automatically.

A joke from the days of Brezhnev told of an American boasting to a Soviet citizen that in America he was perfectly free to run down the street shouting “President Johnson is a criminal!” So what, came the reply. In Russia I too can run down the street shouting “President Johnson is a criminal!”

Just as one does not prove one’s devotion to free speech by tolerating views with which one is in accord, so one cannot prove one’s empathy by assuming the position of those who think and feel like oneself.

In the book I discussed at the beginning of this essay, Martha Nussbaum correctly observes that the humanities can teach empathy. They allow us to understand other intellectual positions from within, “imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person” (NFP, 7), and engage in what she calls “critical thinking” about our own beliefs. With these and many similar statements I wholeheartedly agree.

The problem is that Nussbaum does not seem to mean what she says. Page after page, her book stresses the importance of empathizing with the beliefs of humanities professors resembling herself. But the book never invites us to empathize with opposing beliefs and the people who hold them. One “thinks critically” only about the other side. Their motives are always bad ones. They lack empathy! Far from exhibiting empathy, this book exemplifies how to use the term empathy to preclude empathy itself.

People rarely need coaching to appreciate the rectitude of their own opinions. What requires instruction and effort is discovering how a person with whom one is quarreling, or a member of another political party, sees things. Throughout this volume, Nussbaum mentions numerous current social issues, but time after time, and without exception, she presents the predictable position as the only possible one for a decent person.

When I began to teach at Northwestern, I passed by a professor’s office decorated with a large sticker, common at the time, shouting “QUESTION AUTHORITY!” From within, I heard the professor berating a student with words I shall never forget: “How can you think that?! Hasn’t my course taught you anything??”

As Nussbaum tells the story, those dedicated to economic growth, rather than the humanities, insist that care be taken “lest the
historical and economic narrative lead to any serious critical thinking about class, about race and gender, about whether foreign investment really is good for the rural poor” (NFP, 20). “Educators for economic growth” want to be sure that people turn out morally obtuse because “moral obtuseness is necessary to carry out programs of economic development that ignore inequality” (NFP, 23).

Set aside the fact that social science, as well as humanities, courses are often devoted to making such points. These are hardly empathetic portraits of all those proponents of economic growth. Outside of Spiderman comics, no one sits around rubbing his hands with glee about doing evil. People with whom one disagrees do not conspire to promote moral obtuseness or create needless suffering. From their perspective, they are promoting justice.

Perhaps this point is obvious to me because I grew up among Communists who justified Stalin’s purges and liquidations, the killing of millions of “class enemies,” while sincerely believing that what they, not their critics, advocated was justice. I did not doubt their sincerity. But in Martha Nussbaum’s universe, entrepreneurs, conservatives from many lands, Hindu nationalists, and others with whom she disagrees actively and knowingly promote evil.

Unless they have a proper humanist education, “males learn that success means being above the body and its frailties, so they learn to characterize some underclass (women, African Americans) as hyperbodily, thus in need of being dominated” (NFP, 35). Moreover, “white people who feel great compassion for other white people can treat people of color like animals or objects, refusing to see the world from their perspective. Men often treat women this way....” (NFP, 38). So they do. But isn’t it also worth asking whether nonwhite peoples ever look on white people or other nonwhite people as animals or objects? It wasn’t Europeans who committed the Rwandan genocide, nor did white people run the Khmer Rouge. Do women never refuse to feel compassion for men or other women?

In countless passages of this sort, the direction of criticism goes relentlessly in one direction. I understand thinking this way. I know it can be part of a desire for justice. But I find it remarkable to offer such thinking in recommending empathy.
Great art enables one to see the world from unfamiliar points of view and to experience life as others do. It can allow us to empathize even with those who do not value empathy, like Casaubon in *Middlemarch* or Tolstoy’s Karenin, who regards his own considerable capacity for empathy as a weakness.

After Nussbaum has appealed to the right sentiments, it turns out she wants to open only the minds of others. The minds of those with whom she agrees are apparently already empathetic enough.

True empathy begins when we bracket our own perspective in order to experience that of another person. Perhaps it is easier to do so with people on the other side of the globe than with those of a different social class, political party, or religion living in one’s own town. With people far away, nothing personal at stake. That is why Dostoevsky’s Father Zossima remarks that it is so much easier to love humanity or people “at a distance” than to love one’s neighbor.

But just as we recognize Kitty’s goodness when she imagines her actions from Levin’s point of view, so we need to do the difficult thing and empathize not only with distant people but also with those nearby.

We need to sense in each other person “an equivalent center of self.” And there is no better way to practice such sensing than by reading great novels. If one can help students do that, they will want to read more. And that is the real test of a humanist education.