

Manifesto of a New Movement in American Literature

[The following essay was written in the late eighties.]

Declaration

We proclaim a new movement in American literature. Its principle tenets are the following:

- Literature is experience, not words. (An explanation of this statement is given below under “Literature is Experience”.)
- Great literature arises from profound experience of the human condition.
- The reduction of the study of literature to the study of words is the death of literature.

This movement is, among other things, a reaction against the obsession with theory that now prevails in university English departments. The degree of this obsession is epitomized by the professor who, as a member of a committee evaluating English departments, downgraded all those which were “unashamedly departments of literature” (Sykes, Charles J., *ProfScam*, Regnery Gateway, Washington, D. C., 1988, p. 198).

“What passes for the study of literature in many college classrooms would be nearly unrecognizable to anyone who graduated before the new critical fads came to dominate the university. Today, the state of the art literature classroom is a laboratory where the cutting edge is not literature or the dry, musty business of reading and understanding Great Books. It is Theory.” — *ibid.*, p. 181.

“None of [the] gibberish and critical doublespeak [of post-structuralism] would really do much damage, of course, as long as students still had a chance to be exposed to authors like Shakespeare or Austen. Given a fair shot, the classics would more than hold their own against the new barbarians. But a central aim of the [post-structuralist] movement in literature is the abolition of the traditional canon of literary study and, to date, its adherents have been remarkably successful.” — *ibid.*, p. 187. “Academic researchers with all their newly minted theoretical apparatus can have their way with Emily Dickinson, pulling apart Dickinson texts to discover that Emily was variously a ‘modernist, feminist, symbolist, linguist, philosopher, crypto-politico, cultural inebriate, unrequited lover, aging adolescent, inverted astronaut, and ravished romantic.’ — *ibid.*, p. 185.

Thus, for example, at the 1989 conference of the Modern Language Association,

“...Paula Bennett of Northeastern University jolted the crowd with her assertion that the hidden strategy of Emily Dickinson’s poetry is: using encoded images of clitoral masturbation to transcend sex-role limitations imposed by the 19th century patriarchy. The basic idea was that Dickinson loaded her work with reference to peas, crumbs, and flower buds in order to broadcast secret messages of forbidden onanistic delight to other female illuminati. ‘Why does she write in such short, explosive sentences?’ asked Bennett. ‘The style is clitoral, as far as I’m concerned.’ She cited some poems, including one in which Emily spies a bird coming down a walk and, Bennett believes, experiences auto-ecstasy when the bird takes flight. ‘I offered him a crumb/And he unrolled his feathers/And rowed him softer home — /Than Oars divide the Ocean,/Too silver for a seam — /Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon/ Leap, plashless as they swim.’” — Alex Heard, “Jargonaut”, *The New Republic*, Jan. 29, 1990, p. 11.

“Literature Is Experience”

When we say that “literature is experience”, we mean that literature “points to” human experience, it is “about” human experience, and words are simply a means for representing that experience. (For an analogy between this idea and a basic idea in computer science, see “Additional

Thoughts”, below.) More precisely, we view novels, short stories and plays as being fundamentally instances of *storytelling*, and poems as being fundamentally instances of *song or chant*. Thus, for us, it is the human voice, and not print, which is the preferred transmitter of literature, and hence our motto, *back to the human voice!* We believe that the various disciplines having classical (“serious”) music as their subject, should serve as a model for the disciplines having literature as their subject. Roughly speaking, we see the following parallels between music and literature:

- The printed musical score corresponds to the literary text;
- The performance of the score corresponds to the reading aloud of the text, performance being one of two types of interpretation, the other type being the traditional academic analysis of texts.
- Musicology corresponds to those activities in literary scholarship having to do with the “authentication of the text” (who wrote what, when, where, and with what intention, insofar as this can be determined by historical record).

“Truly fine poetry must be read aloud. A good poem does not allow itself to be read in a low voice or silently. If we can read it silently, it is not a valid poem: a poem demands pronunciation. Poetry always remembers that it was an oral art before it was a written art. It remembers that it was first song.” — Borges, Jorge Luis, “The Divine Comedy”, in *Seven Nights*, New Directions, N.Y., 1980, pp. 9-10.

Scholarship

We draw strict boundaries to what we consider to be the proper concerns of scholarship. We maintain that scholarship in both literature and music should be concerned with matters about which there exist rational grounds for a consensus among scholars. Thus, of a given literary or musical text, we believe that scholars should limit themselves to attempting to answer the following questions:

- who wrote it?
- when did they write it?
- where did they write it?
- what knowledge and experience did they assume among their audience?
- how did they want it performed (or read)?

Regarding the next to last item: scholars who publish editions of classics take it for granted that their task is to explain every word and phrase which is likely to be unfamiliar to the modern reader. (Consider, e.g., almost any edition of *The Divine Comedy* or of Shakespeare’s plays or of Goethe’s *Faust*.) But the important question is not, How much background information can modern scholarship provide about the work? the important question is, What is the *least* amount of information that the modern reader needs in order to meet the author’s original expectations of his *typical* reader? This amount is likely to be far *less* than most scholars, in their print-confined world, imagine. Most people who attend Shakespeare’s plays probably don’t know a tenth of the information in the footnotes and prefaces to a scholarly edition of the plays and yet they manage to derive a great deal from the performances. Similarly, an outstanding reading of a poetical work can do more for the appreciation of the work than pages of footnotes and analysis.

We will have more to say on this subject below, under “Interpretation”.

Not all the questions listed above can necessarily be answered for a given work. But the answer to each question must be based on evidence and on the inferences that can be drawn from evidence. In other words, a “calculus” must exist, at least in principle, by which it can be deter-

mined, at any given time, which answers are the “best” answers. At present — 1991 — scholars apply the rules of such calculi unconsciously and imprecisely whenever they carry on debates about questions of the above type in the literature. It is only in the pursuit of answers to the above questions that scholars have any right to claim that their work is “objective”, because “objective” simply means that such calculi exist.

Interpretation

We believe that interpretation is fundamentally an *art form*.

“Criticism, [Borges] has reminded us, is simply a branch of imaginative literature...” — Reid, Alastair, “Introduction”, in Borges, Jorge Luis, *Seven Nights*, New Directions, N.Y., 1980, p. 4.

Interpretation is not part of scholarship as defined above, for the simple reason that there exist no rational grounds by which the “best” of several different interpretations can be decided at any given time. Interpretive statements are all of the form, *x* can be seen (regarded, conceived of, experienced) as *y*, which in no way implies that *x is y* in a logical or scientific sense (e.g., as in “mass is energy”).

We believe there are at least *two* kinds of interpretation. One is the kind that is practiced primarily by academics engaged in literary criticism, as, for example, in this analysis of Keats’ “To Autumn”:

“Within the trope of plenitude, which is his symbolic form for the season, Keats, in a powerful claim for the sensual power of the poetry vis-a-vis music and sculpture, satisfies each of the senses, higher and lower alike, in a relaxation of censorship that dissolves the ethical strenuousness of both *Indolence* (in its guilt) and *Melancholy* (in its admonition). The plenitude takes various syntactic forms, varying from the simplest doublings (‘mists and mellow fruitfulness,’ ‘load and bless,’ ‘more, /And still more’) to the amplest distributiveness, seen most clearly in the frequent apparitions of the goddess — found sitting, *or* asleep, *and sometimes* crossing a brook, *or* by a cider-press...We see the plenitude of one instrument after another being added to the choir: the gnats, and full-grown lambs; hedge-crickets; the red-breast; and gathering swallows. For the plenitude of multiple nouns, we find multiple verbs — mourn, and bleat, and sing, and whistle, and twitter...We encounter the plenitude of particular succeeded by generalization: ‘To bend with *apples* the moss’d cottage-trees,/And fill *all fruit* with ripeness to the core.’ We find as well the plenitude of repetition: ‘mellow *fruitfulness*,’ ‘to load and bless/ With *fruit*.../And fill *all fruit* with ripeness’; ‘the winnowing *wind*,’ ‘the light *wind*’; later ‘*flowers*’ and ‘twined *flowers*...’” — Helen Vendler, quoted in “Several Ways of Looking at Helen Vendler”, *Harvard Magazine*, March-April 1990, p. 55.

This kind of interpretation has much lower prestige in music scholarship, and rightfully so. (A familiar example is the traditional interpretation of Beethoven’s piano sonata, Opus 27, No. 2 (The Moonlight Sonata)).

The second, and by far the more important, kind of interpretation, is *performance*, i.e., the reading of a literary work aloud; this, of course, corresponds to the performance of a musical work. We believe that the task of reading a piece of literature aloud in a way that moves an audience, is every bit as difficult as the task of performing a traditional academic analysis such as Vendler’s. We believe that to perform this task requires that the performer “know” or “understand” the work every bit as deeply as the academic, though the performer may not arrive at this knowledge in the same way. In the case of poetry, we consider Olivier’s film renditions of several of Shakespeare’s plays, e.g., *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, to be far more important than the volumes of aca-

demic interpretations of these plays, because these films provide a much larger audience with a far more powerful experience of these works. We make a similar claim, for the same reasons, for David Case's reading of *Don Quixote* on Books-on-Tape, a reading that many of us consider the best reading of a classic ever recorded.

As proof of the growing popularity of the return to the human voice in literature, we point to:

- the growing popularity of recorded readings of books;
- the popularity of oral street poetry (e.g., rap);
- the growing popularity of story-telling as an entertainment form (see, e.g., "Tale Tellers Go Big Time and Live Happily Ever After", *Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 29, 1991, p. 1).
- the resurgence, in several metropolitan areas of the country, of radio drama;
- the growing popularity of poetry readings, e.g., in bookstores;
- the growing popularity of readings of books on radio;
- the popularity of films, plays, and books in which conversation plays a central role, e.g., Louis Malle's film, *My Dinner With Andre*, Manuel Puig's novel, later made into film, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, and Philip Roth's novel, *Deception*.

Reading a work aloud in a way that moves an audience, requires, among other things, that the speaker use effective intonations and pauses. If an outstanding reading of a poem exists on record or tape — e.g., Michael MacLiammoir's readings of Yeats poetry (Spoken Arts, New Rochelle, N.Y., LP Disc 753) — the speaker can memorize the reading, i.e., employ the same intonations and pauses as those on the recording. But there is no reason why a notation shouldn't exist for expressing spoken intonations and pauses, just as a notation has existed for centuries for expressing musical pitches, their durations, and the intervals between them. There is, at present, no such generally recognized notation, a lack which some members of the movement are attempting to fill. There have been attempts in the past to develop notations, e.g., for pauses and breathing points in the reading of a poem — see, e.g., Olson, Charles, "Projective Verse", in *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, ed. by Donald Allen and Warren Tallman, Grove Press, N.Y., 1973, pp. 147 - 158.

We assert that poetry, at least in the West, is fundamentally a spoken art (fully recognizing that there are visual poems which attempt to lift, into ceremony, the words by visual means instead of by sound). To put it another way, it is essential, if one studies poetry, to try to understand why poets should have become concerned with prosody, with the various kinds of feet, e.g., iamb, trochee, spondee. This task is all but hopeless unless one *listens* to examples of words in each kind of foot, just as trying to understand music without hearing it is all but hopeless (except, perhaps, for professional musicians and musicologists). The simplest musical phrase, sequence of notes, has a much deeper meaning for us, or at least for those with an ear for music, than the same sequence seen on paper. Who (other than teachers and professors) could get excited over the *concept* of a long syllable followed by a short syllable, or a short syllable followed by a long syllable?

To the criticism that a poem is also a visual object, we reply that, for the vast majority of poems, an audience will be more deeply moved by hearing an outstanding reading aloud of the poem, than by reading it to themselves from the printed page. A number of the 20th century's greatest poets — including Yeats, Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and Frost — felt the reading aloud of their poetry to be sufficiently important that they made recordings of their own readings of some of their work, although not all of these readings can be regarded as "outstanding".

Storytelling

We believe that storytelling, like all artistic activity, is natural to most human beings. We do not believe, as academics do, that a special few in each generation are “gifted” with the desire and the ability to tell stories (these are known as “writers”), while the vast majority of the population must content themselves with reading what these gifted individuals produce. Whenever someone has a desire to tell someone else what happened to him/her yesterday, over the weekend, last year, many years ago, he/she has a desire to engage in storytelling. The ability to do this, of course, varies across the population. But almost everyone has some desire, and some ability, to be a storyteller, and in fact most people are storytellers in their everyday lives.

We believe that the essence of the novel, short story, or play is a *story*, in other words, a representation of human experience. Whether or not the story is “true” or “autobiographical” or “fictional” is a matter of complete indifference to us. We regard with amused contempt the endless nervous fussing, on the part of creative writing students, their teachers, most critics and academics and many authors, over the question whether a literary work is really “fiction” or not.

Against “Write As You Speak”

“Write as you speak” has been a popular dictum among writers throughout most of the 20th century. What it has come to mean in practice is, “write as *we* speak”, “we” being the particular elite which is judging the quality of the writing in question. Or, more precisely, the dictum has come to mean, “write in the way that we who judge these matters consider to be writing as one speaks”. But there is almost always a great deal of difference between the speech of even the most cultivated speakers, and the representation of this speech on paper. Furthermore, many writers are far more articulate as writers than they are as speakers. The essence of the matter is that “write as you speak” has come to be a formula for a style of writing that has little to do with how the author speaks. We criticize the formula because it has led to the utterly wrong idea that *if* one wants to write in a speech-based form, i.e., as a speaker, e.g., as a story-teller, he/she must necessarily write in this style. This is one of the strangleholds on literature which we are attempting to break.

Against the Well-Made Story

Another stranglehold on literature is the idea of the “well-made story” so loved by academic analysts, creative-writing teachers and others who live by print — the carefully constructed efficient literary product of prescribed length and style which contains not a single unnecessary word. (I challenge any literary person to pass a blindfold test on the stories in a book like *The Best American Short Stories of the 20th Century* — i.e., to tell whether two passages read aloud are by the same author (forget about trying to name the author).) In real life, a good storyteller often includes many “unnecessary” words, including digressions, asides, jokes, observations, and interactions with his listeners. In stories about love, we believe it perfectly legitimate to include lengthy descriptions of love-making because how people make love is as revealing of their characters as is the way they speak and behave toward each other in other activities of ordinary life. We believe that all that matters is the depth of “truth”, artistic and otherwise, in a story, and that everything else is secondary.

Among the numerous mannerisms of the well-made story, one that particularly bothers us is that of the “objective” narrating voice.

“...along about the time of Henry James, the author began to tell his story in a different way. He began to let it come through the minds and eyes of the characters themselves, and he sat behind the scenes, apparently disinterested. By the time we get to James Joyce, the author is nowhere to be found in the book. The reader is on his own, floundering around in the thoughts of various unsavory characters. He finds himself in the middle of a world without comment.” — O’Connor, Flannery, “The Nature and Aim of Fiction”.

We find it difficult not to ask of any story, “Who is telling this and why?” Thus, among the classical authors we particularly admire Chaucer (in *The Canterbury Tales*), Cervantes, and Browning (in the dramatic monologues). We become uneasy at the notion of the author as ubiquitous movie or TV camera. We want to know, “How did the author know this about that character?” We are suspicious of the strange God-like presence of the behind-the-scenes narrator who, while being merely a recorder of what happened, nevertheless manages to reveal to the reader just those what-happened’s that make for a nice short-story product, with its little light that goes on at the end to reveal yet another aspect of human character, shaded by a subtle touch of the prevailing morality or counter-morality.

Authors and Schools of Literature We Despise

First of all, we despise the Eastern Squire school of literature. We despise Henry James, that darling of academics and of the Eastern Squire school. We despise his precious style, particularly his later style, his toadying to the wealthy class of his day, and his fastidious avoidance of the dirtier regions of human experience. Among living writers of the school [at the time of this writing], the one we despise the most is John Updike even though we recognize that if there had to be a *New Yorker* magazine and an Eastern literary establishment, then there had to be a John Updike. As one of our members has said, “If writing like John Updike constitutes literary success, then thank God I’m a failure. Perfect manners are not enough for literary greatness.” We despise the insufferable Susan Sontag — are there no American writers who have the courage, the ability, to work without always *being seen*? We have nothing but contempt for intellectuals with this need to be in the public eye; we dismiss out of hand a woman who has a famous photographer photograph her in alluring poses on her bed while she is in the final stages of cancer. *Christ, woman, have you no shame?* We despise anyone so smugly confident that her ho-hum opinions, just because they are expressed in flawless prose, are actually *knowledge*. We say it without a moment’s hesitation: if admiring this woman, respecting her, much less studying her work, became the requirement for being an intellectual, we would all become ditch diggers.

We despise Hemingway, the Hollywood star — the John Wayne — of American literature, and most of his followers, in particular, the minimalists. We despise his idiot vocabulary and affected style — a style that is little more than the endless application of the old rhetorical device of *polysyndeton*: the “repetition of conjunctions in close succession”¹. We consider it a good exercise for all those who are tempted to admire him, to rewrite typical Hemingway paragraphs in plain English, e.g., replacing the “and”s with semi-colons and periods where they belong, and replacing all the “commence”s with “begin”s. (Do you see how clever our great manly author is here? He makes it clear that he will have nothing to do with those big words, those Latinate words used by effeminate scholars and intellectuals, oh, no, only the plainest all-American Anglo-

1. *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, G & C. Merriam Co., Springfield, Mass., 1981.

Saxon pine boards for him. But yet he is an author — he is literary, he must make sure the reader doesn't lose sight of this. But how shall he accomplish this? Why, by every now and then using a *big* word, a word that the people who went to college (unlike him) would use, a word like “commence”. Now don't you admire his simple style even more? Clearly, this is a man who has *chosen* to use those idiot-simple words, even though he knows all the big ones. To have made such a choice — what bravery, what courage, what manliness!

We think it a shame when a writer does not consider the full vocabulary of the language he is writing in to be at his disposal. Among models of good prose style, we regard Nietzsche's as among the best.

And the names of the characters in his novels: Nick Adams, Frederic Henry, Robert Jordan — so plain, so American, so regular-guy (but the missing “k” in “Frederic”: you see, our author is a literary man after all) — these are names that a boy who wanted to grow up to be a tough-guy writer would think up in his first juvenile attempts.

We despise Hemingway's gutless love of war and violence. Many writers have had far worse, and more extensive, experience of war than he — T. E. Lawrence and Erich Maria Remarque, to name two — and have written better about it than he. We think that Hemingway's “war experience” — a few weeks as a WWI ambulance driver that were ended by a minor wound, and then, during WW II, cruising off the shore of Cuba in a power boat with a bunch of drunken cronies and a machine gun, “hunting” for enemy submarines — is sufficiently absurd to make any intelligent reader regard with contempt anything he had to say on the subject of war and bravery.

“Hemingway was in Spain [during the late 30s], ‘researching’ *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Fancying himself hard-boiled and experienced in the cynicism of war, ‘Papa’ was easily duped. When his friend Dos Passos became worried about the disappearance of [Gil] Robles [leader of a democratic right-wing group], whom he knew well (he had in fact already been murdered), Hemingway was tipped off by his ‘*amigo*’ in counter-espionage, the sinister Pepe Quintanilla, that Robles was a spy, and at once assumed he was guilty. He attributed Dos Passos' ‘continued belief in Robles's loyalty to the good-hearted naivety of a “typical liberal American liberal attitude”’ — but of course it was Hemingway who proved naive.” Johnson, Paul, *Modern Times: The World from the Twenties to the Eighties*, Harper and Row, Publishers, N.Y., 1985, p. 337.

We despise Hemingway's veneration of hunting, not only because many of the animals he hunted were already in danger of extinction, but also because he considered hunting a measure of a man's courage while at the same time he turned aside from participating in the only form of hunting which is a true test of a man's courage, namely, the hunting of an armed human being by another.

And we despise Hemingway's followers, e.g., Norman Mailer, an amateur boxer, an admirer of the violence of blacks. Granting that his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, was a competent war novel, we nevertheless challenge any thinking person to read his essay, “The White Negro”, a piece of writing that can only be described as an embarrassment — the work of a fool..

Literary Subjects and Authors the Movement Regards As Important

We think literature should deal with the important questions of our time, and that it should do so in a non-cynical, non-trivializing way. Among these questions are:

- Should people whose lives are meaningless, go on living, and if so, how should they live?
- Should the human race be continued, or should it be ended, and if so, by what means?

- How should parents raise children?
- What obligations, if any, do children have toward their parents?
- When is the murder of a parent by a child justified?
- Is life worth living into old age? If not, how should people go about committing suicide? If so, why, and furthermore how, should old people live, in particular, how should they deal with loneliness, joblessness, reduced income, failing health?
- How should people face death?

We think authors should have the courage, *the ability*, to work alone. If they happen to become celebrities, it should be abundantly clear that they do not regard this status as having anything to do with the intrinsic worth of what they produce, and in fact that they abhor this status.

Thus, it should be clear why, among the authors we admire most are: Beckett, Chaucer, Cervantes, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Camus, Solzhenitsyn, John Le Carre, Isaac Bashevis Singer. We have little use for the vast majority of American authors, but among the few we unreservedly admire are Hawthorne, Melville, Mark Twain, Faulkner, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., and Ray Bradbury.

The Teaching of Literature

“I have been a professor of English literature in the College of Philosophy and Letters at the University of Buenos Aires, and I have tried to disregard as much as possible the history of literature. When my students asked me for a bibliography, I told them, ‘A bibliography is unimportant — after all, Shakespeare knew nothing of Shakesperian criticism. Why not study the texts directly? If you like the book, fine; if you don’t, don’t read it. The idea of compulsory reading is absurd; it’s only worthwhile to speak of compulsory happiness. I believe that poetry is something one feels. If you don’t feel poetry, if you have no sense of beauty, if a story doesn’t make you want to know what happened next, then the author has not written for you. Put it aside. Literature is rich enough to offer you some other author worthy of your attention — or one today unworthy of your attention whom you will read tomorrow.’ ” — Borges, Jorge Luis, “Poetry”, in *Seven Nights*, New Directions, N.Y., 1980, p. 81.

Additional Thoughts

Why have teachers of literature become so obsessed with theory?

“On the face of it, it is a curious thing for teachers of literature to turn themselves into amateur sociologists and amateur philosophers. Bromwich [in *Politics by Other Means: Higher Education and Group Thinking*] explains it as part of the corruption of literary studies by ‘professionalization’. The logic of the process is plausible enough. Most middle-class occupations are associated with the idea that their practitioners are professionals, possessed of an expertise that they have and the laity do not. To claim professional standing is in fact to claim to know things that laymen do not. Helping students to read books does not fit that picture.

“It therefore raises the question what it is that the interpreters of a literary tradition *know* — what is their expertise. That question is asked by people who know that ‘for people doing intellectual work, the way to social acceptance in American has always been through imitation of the sciences.’ The social sciences long ago went down that track. Now literary theorists are following the social scientists. Not surprisingly, a decidedly sociological tone creeps into the subject.

“A concise professional thesis in literature departments now runs as follows. “We need to teach not texts themselves but how we situate ourselves in reference to those texts.” It is pointless to object that nobody ever taught “the texts themselves,” whatever that may mean; rather, teachers conducted a class on a book for the sake of showing a way of thinking and talking about books. The point of the statement above is less to argue or persuade than to announce that the subject has changed. Correctly translated, it means: “We need to teach not interpretation but the sociology of knowledge.”” — Ryan, Alan, “Invasion of the Mind Snatchers”, *The New York Review of Books*, Feb. 11, 1993, p. 15.

There is an analogy between an experience and its representation by words in literature, and a mathematical function and its representation by symbols in computer science. In literature, the author typically “finds words” to express a story he has in mind; similarly, in computer science, the computer programmer “finds a sequence of symbols” in a programming language to produce a program that represents (computes) a mathematical function he has in mind. And just as the story in itself — the mere “what-happened” — apart from any dialogue it may contain, is wordless, so the function — the “what” that the program is to compute — is an abstraction that does not depend on a particular set of symbols. Thus, e.g., ordinary addition is a function which can be represented (computed) in many different ways, e.g., the way we learn in grammar school or by a computer program designed to maximize the speed of the computation on a specific model of computer. A *difference* between computer programs and literature is that, whereas there are many different programs that can compute the same function (in fact, an infinite number of programs!), there seems to be only one sequence of words for each story, i.e., in general, a change in the words of a story typically results in a change, however subtle, in the story itself.