

Presidential Address 2006: It Must Change

MARJORIE PERLOFF

MARJORIE PERLOFF has written many books on twentieth-century poetry and poetics, including *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton UP, 1981), *The Futurist Moment* (U of Chicago P, 1986), *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (U of Chicago P, 1992), *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (U of Chicago P, 1996), and *Twenty-First Century Modernism* (Blackwell, 2001). She is professor of English emerita at Stanford University and, currently, scholar-in-residence at the University of Southern California.

THIS YEAR MARKS THE CENTENNIAL OF SAMUEL BECKETT'S BIRTH, and the celebrations around the world have been a wonder to behold. From Buenos Aires to Tokyo, from Rio de Janeiro to Sofia, from South Africa (where Beckett did not permit his plays to be performed until apartheid was ended) to New Zealand, from Florida State University, in Tallahassee, to the University of Reading, from the Barbican Theatre, in London, to the Pompidou Center, in Paris, from Hamburg and Kassel and Zurich to Aix-en-Provence and Lille, from Saint Petersburg to Madrid to Tel Aviv, and of course most notably in Dublin, 2006 has been Beckett's year. Most of the festivals have included not only performances of the plays but also lectures, symposia, readings, art exhibitions, and manuscript displays. Paris Beckett 2006, for example, cosponsored by the French government and New York University's Center for French Civilization and Culture, has featured productions of Beckett's entire dramatic oeuvre, mounted in theaters large and small all over Paris, and lectures by such major figures as the novelist-theorists Philippe Sollers and Hélène Cixous, the playwrights Fernando Arrabal and Israel Horovitz, and the philosopher Alain Badiou. To round things out, in 2007 the Pompidou Center will host a major exhibition of and on Beckett's work.

Some of these festivals had specific themes: at Reading, for example, the conference papers were devoted to language and intertextuality (Caselli 2). The Web site for the Tokyo symposium (*Borderless Beckett*) tells us:

In 1953, a Japanese student named Ando Shin'ya watched the world premiere of *En attendant Godot* at the Théâtre de Babylone in Paris and was enchanted by this "unprecedented" play. . . . Ando himself directed *Godot's* Japanese premiere by the major Shingeki ("modern

theatre”) company Bungakuza in 1960. . . . The production triggered the avant-garde movement called the “Underground Theatre,” which developed into “Shogekjo-Undou” . . . the new wave of Japanese theatre.

Appropriately enough, the Tokyo symposium was called Borderless Beckett; it was committed, according to the Web site, to the notion that “Beckett’s art . . . undermines dualistic differences between English and French, geographical and political differences, and conventional frameworks of philosophy and aesthetics.”

Who, indeed, more global an artist than Beckett? On the Los Angeles Chicano blog *La Bloga*, Michael Sedano, a regular *La Bloga* reviewer and commentator, recently posted a piece called “Reading *Waiting for Godot* in Translation.” The occasion was twofold: a visit to UCLA of the Dublin Gate Theatre and the publication of a new Grove Press edition of *Godot* with Beckett’s French original (1952) and his English translation (1954) on facing pages. “What in the world,” Sedano asks, “is a Chicano critic doing writing about Samuel Beckett?” And he explains:

I’d never read *Godot* in French, and even if I had, I doubt I would have done a cross-cultural reading. What a perplexing bit of fun I’m having. So much, I recommend you do likewise. (Sidebar: I speak and read French as a result of the University of California’s absurd rule that Spanish was not an academic language in 1963, so the language of Cervantes, my grandparents, and my parents, was forbidden for graduation credit. Chingao!)

Sedano becomes absorbed in the curious disparities between the French and English texts. “On the left, Pozzo asks Lucky, simply, if Lucky understands; in English Lucky gets called hog.” “Quien sabe,” says Sedano, “but sabes que, it’s going to be puro fun attending the performance.” The comments from his readers reinforce this motif. Manuel L. sends in a citation from *Endgame*’s Clov—“I use the words you taught me / If they don’t

mean anything anymore, / teach me others. Or let me be silent”—and adds, “Beckett is a Chicano! Loved your post.”

As for the Dublin Gate performance, Design for Sharing, a program that brings inner-city children from kindergarten through grade 12 to concerts, dance recitals, and theater at UCLA, sponsored a workshop on *Godot* by Barry McGovern, which was judged to be one of the highlights of the year. The students who attended were evidently sitting on the edge of their seats, especially during the following famously absurd dialogue in act 1:

[Silence. Estragon looks attentively at the tree.]

VLADIMIR. What do we do now?

ESTRAGON. Wait.

VLADIMIR. Yes, but while waiting.

ESTRAGON. What about hanging ourselves?

VLADIMIR. Hmmm. It’d give us an erection.

ESTRAGON. [*highly excited*] An erection!

VLADIMIR. With all that follows. Where it falls mandrakes grow. That’s why they shriek when you pull them up. Did you not know that?

ESTRAGON. Let’s hang ourselves immediately.

VLADIMIR. From a bough? [*They go toward the tree.*] I wouldn’t trust it. (43)

The mandrake reference in this passage, with its network of allusions to the Crucifixion, to occult legends in which mandrakes are said to utter human screams as they are pulled from the earth, and to John Donne’s famous little song beginning “Go and catch a falling star, / Get with child a mandrake root,” would hardly be accessible to a student audience, but the inconsequentiality of Didi’s speech and Gogo’s equally unexpected reaction evidently charmed the audience.

What does all this have to do with the MLA and with our role as teachers and students of language and literature? How, for example, does the intense global literary activity I have been describing relate to the current picture of the profession as gleaned from the 2006 *MLA Job Information List*? Suppose, for

example, I am a newly minted PhD in English who wrote her dissertation on some aspect of Beckett—his plays, novels, poetry, or film—or, more broadly, on modern British and Irish literature and culture. Studying the list carefully, I came up with the following numbers. There are six advertised positions in modern British literature, no field specified. You will agree that, given the wealth of British writing in the twentieth century, my chances are not exactly good. There are, further, three positions in modern drama, no nationality specified, and two each in “British/Irish” drama and British fiction. That makes thirteen positions, of which three are in Canadian universities, where, as a United States citizen, my chances would probably be slim. Given such lean pickings, the odds of my getting any sort of tenure-track (or even non-tenure-track) job in 2006 are slight indeed.

How can there be such a disconnect between what writers and scholars at home and abroad seem to be doing and the availability of teaching positions in MLA-related departments? Who, after all, were the many students and professors who gave papers at Reading and Dublin, Lille and Aix-en-Provence, Rio and Tokyo, Tallahassee and Atlanta? The answer, my survey of speakers reveals, is that participants were established, senior scholars on the one hand, graduate students on the other. Missing were what the American Association of University Professors now calls “replacement faculty,” the new assistant professoriat that will come up through the ranks.

The dearth of entry-level jobs in United States departments of language and literature is by now a familiar story, and I shall not dwell on it here, except to say that such jobs as exist are especially unlikely to go to candidates who have written their dissertations on a single author. Out in the world beyond the academy, individual poets are warmly celebrated: witness this past November’s three-day Frank O’Hara Festival in New York, sponsored by Poets House, the Poetry Project at St. Marks Church,

and the Museum of Modern Art. But dissertation topics? At Stanford, of the forty-nine dissertations completed between 2000 and 2006, exactly one deals with a single author, Henry James. But it is not just the rejection of the individual author, of “genius theory,” that has become *de rigueur*. Of the remaining forty-eight dissertations, only a handful have any specifically literary component. The following are typical titles: “The Garden and the Crop: Revising Rural Labor in the United States Urban Imagination, 1870–1915,” “Offending Lives: Subjectivity and Australian Convict Autobiographies, 1788–1899,” and “The Sway of Chance in Eighteenth Century England.” These dissertations may well use literary texts as examples, but if so, the fictions, dramas, or poems in question are taken to be means to an end—they are windows through which we see the world beyond the text, symptoms of cultural desires, drives, anxieties, or prejudices. Thus, the classical and medieval rhetorical triad—*docere, delectare, movere* (“to teach, to delight, to move”)—a triad operative for centuries—has been reduced to a single one: the teaching function. Not surprisingly, then, the governing paradigm for so-called literary study is now taken from anthropology and history, as the emphasis on dates indicates. As a test case, consider three titles of current fellowship projects at the National Humanities Center in North Carolina (see www.nhc.rtp.nc.us):

Traveling Philosophers: The Constitution
of a Pragmatist International Network,
1890–1920

Stages of Transition: Performing South Africa’s
Truth Commission

Lollard Affect and the Contestation of Holiness,
1370–1550

I invite you to guess from which departments these project statements emerge. Philosophy, political science, religious studies, in that order? No, the first, “Traveling Philosophers,” is by a historian; the second, on South Africa’s Truth Commission, is by a professor of the-

ater; and the third, on the Lollard contestation of holiness, is by an English professor.

Many of us regard this blurring of boundaries as a healthy sign, a marker of our newfound interdisciplinarity. Perhaps. But, whatever the *inter-* in the topics listed above, there is one discipline that is conspicuously absent, and that discipline is what the Greeks called *poētikē*, the discipline of poetics. True, the South African Truth Commission may be better understood when we examine its workings as a form of theater, and the meaning of holiness for the followers of John Wycliff may well have a strong rhetorical component. But in these and related cases, the literary, if it matters at all, is always secondary; it has at best an instrumental value. Accordingly, it would be more accurate to call the predominant activity of contemporary literary scholars *other-disciplinary* rather than interdisciplinary.

Why is the “merely” literary so suspect today? There can be no easy answer to this question, but perhaps the first thing to acknowledge is that the question is by no means new. Consider, for instance, the argument of Plato’s *Ion*. This early dialogue, written sometime in the first decade of the fourth century BCE, is set in Athens: it presents Socrates in conversation with the rhapsode Ion, who has just returned from Epidaurus, where he won first prize at a festival in honor of Asclepius. A rhapsode was part performance artist, part literary critic; he gave public recitations, followed by critical commentaries on them, and drew large audiences. Ostensibly Ion, whose specialty was Homer, drew twenty thousand people at Epidaurus; he wore a golden crown and received handsome payment.

Socrates begins by positing that surely a rhapsode “must comprehend the utterances of the poet [in question], for the rhapsode must become an interpreter of the poet’s thought [*dianoia*] for those who listen” (sec. 530c). How is it, he wonders, that Ion is “skilled in Homer, but not in Hesiod or the other poets” (531c)? After all, Socrates suggests, don’t all

the poets talk about war, about the relations of men, good and bad, the birth of gods and heroes, and so on? Ion has no answer: he only knows that Hesiod puts him to sleep, whereas he adores Homer. To which Socrates responds, “The riddle is not hard to solve, my friend. Now, it is plain to everyone that not from art and knowledge [*ouk technē kai epistēmē*] comes your power concerning Homer. If it were *technē* that gave you power, then you could speak about all the other poets as well” (532c). Indeed, Socrates concludes, it is not through art (*ouk en technēs*) but through divine inspiration (*en-theos*), through being taken out of his senses (*ekplēxis*), that the rhapsode can recite and comment on Homer (533, 535): the rhapsode is, in fact, a second-order or lesser poet, no more than a middleman passing along the Homeric aura. Thus, in the rest of the dialogue Socrates “proves” that Ion knows less about charioteering than any charioteer and hence cannot properly talk about athletic contests in Homer; again, Ion is no physician, diviner, or fisherman. Defensively, Ion finally responds that what he does know is “[t]he kind of thing . . . that a man would say, and a woman would say, and a slave and a free man, a subject and a ruler—the suitable thing, for each” (540b). This is in fact the doctrine of *to prepon* (“fitness”), which will become central in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. But here Socrates pooh-poohs the idea and concludes that there is no such thing as an art and science of poetry—no such thing, in other words, as literary criticism or theory.

Logically speaking, this conclusion has always been difficult to counter. Whereas economists or physicists, geologists or climatologists, physicians or lawyers must master a body of knowledge before they can even think of being licensed to practice, we literary scholars, it is tacitly assumed, have no definable expertise. Is it a question of having mastered the history of English literature from *Beowulf* to the present? Certainly, such mastery is no longer a requirement in the United States: we are not, after all, British, and, besides

downplaying American literature, the Eng-lit requirement does not include anglophone literature from Australia and Africa, the Caribbean and Canada. The same argument applies to French or German or Spanish literature.

Is our expertise, then, in literary theory? For a brief moment in the sixties and seventies, this seemed to be the case: “everyone” had to know Marx and Freud, Benjamin and Adorno, Foucault and Derrida, Lacan and Kristeva. But increasingly this Eurocentric theory has come to seem less than adequate for dealing with the growing body of minority, transnational, and postcolonial literature, and so poststructuralist theory is being replaced by critical race studies and related models, but so eclectic have the categories become that in most colleges and universities there is now no theory requirement at all.

The third traditional role of literary studies—evaluation—is currently dismissed as largely anachronistic. Value is generally understood as a cultural product: what we value depends on our race, class, gender, and ethnicity, our prior educational experience, our age, and so on. There are no universally great works, no individual geniuses. True, Shakespeare continues, somewhat grudgingly, to be taught and studied everywhere, but I have heard scholars say this is not because the author William Shakespeare wrote such unique and wonderful plays, plays we feel everyone should be exposed to, but because Shakespeare is now a code word for a giant culture industry and historical complex—a carrier of sociopolitical meanings too influential to ignore.

Given these aporias of literary study, administrators are beginning to argue, perhaps English departments should concentrate on the study of composition and rhetoric, disciplines that really do teach students things they need to know, and the foreign literature departments should focus on language learning, so important in business, professional life, and especially government service. Indeed, as you have all heard, the current ad-

ministration in Washington has made a great push to strengthen the role of the “less frequently taught” languages—Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, and so on—in the curriculum.

Still, I wonder how many of us, no matter how culturally and politically oriented our own particular research may be, would be satisfied with the elimination of literary study from the curriculum. Again, Plato provides us with an understanding of the conundrum. It is the Plato of the *Republic* who argues that the future guardians of the state should not be exposed to poetry, precisely because the poetic is too appealing, too seductive, too dangerous, too prone to the telling of powerful “lies” about gods and mortals. When, for example, the *Iliad* portrays Achilles, the son of a goddess, as “‘lying now on his side, and then again on his back, and again on his face,’ and then rising up and ‘drifting distraught on the shore of the waste unharvested ocean . . . weeping and lamenting’” (sec. 388b), a bad example is set for young people. Heroes do not behave that way—or do they? “We will beg Homer,” Socrates says famously, “not to be angry if we cancel those and all similar passages, not that they are not poetic and pleasing to most hearers, but because *the more poetic they are, the less are they suited to the ears of boys and men* who are destined to be free and to be more afraid of slavery than of death” (387b; emphasis mine). And in book 10, poetry is classified as an imitation twice removed from the realm of truth (the passage from the idea of a chair to the actual chair to the image of the chair). Hence:

We can admit no poetry into our city save only hymns to the gods and the praises of good men. For if you grant admission to the honeyed Muse in lyric or epic, pleasure and pain will be the lords of your city instead of law and that which shall from time to time have approved itself to the general reason as the best. (607a)

But how and why does the art called poetry exert such a magic spell? If it brings us no closer to the true or the good (the exemplary

case of the latter is the Nazi love of Goethe and Beethoven), how can it be judged powerful enough to be dangerous, to transform the lives of those it touches? Again, why do so many people want to be poets, novelists, artists, composers, even as others, like many of us here tonight, want to be rhapsodes?

Plato himself, we should note, did not practice the separation between poetry and philosophy he preaches: he knew very well that although the study of literature is not a science, there are nevertheless many local truths to be articulated. In book 3 of the *Republic*, for example, he lays out the crucial voice distinctions, foundational for all subsequent theorists, between the basic literary modes—lyric, narrative, dramatic—and in the *Phaedrus* he provides us with a fascinating discussion of poetic etymology vis-à-vis the role sound and the material word play in specific poetic instances. It was left to Aristotle, in chapter 9 of his *Poetics*, to draw out the implications of Plato's analysis:

A poet's object is not to tell what actually happened but what could and would happen either probably or inevitably. The difference between a historian and a poet is not that one writes in prose and the other in verse. . . . The real difference is this, that one tells what happened, the other what might happen. For this reason poetry is something more philosophical and serious [*philosophōteron kai spoudaiōteron*] than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts. (sec. 1451b)

Thus, "What is convincing though impossible should always be preferred to what is possible and unconvincing" (1460a; ch. 24). And "the standard of what is correct is not the same in the art of poetry as it is in the art of social conduct" (1460b; ch. 25).

This last sentence is considered one of the defining classical statements of theory and takes us all the way to Wittgenstein's precept "Do not forget that a poem, although it is composed in the language of information, is not

used in the language-game of giving information" (27; no. 160). At the same time, such precepts have always been questioned—in our day, for example, by Stanley Fish, whose *Is There a Text in This Class?* (1980) argues that, logically speaking, there is no absolute distinction between ordinary and poetic language. Again, Aristotle's insistence that the end of tragedy (or epic) is to produce pleasure, its own particular kind of pleasure, has been contested, never more loudly than in recent decades. Historians, poststructuralist theory has contended, don't tell the truth any more than do the poets; their writing—think of Edward Gibbon—can be just as artistically structured as a novel, and historical writing is, in any case, hardly disinterested. Or—to take the other side—although poets don't tell "what happened" in the simple way Aristotle puts it, of course their representations, once we know how to decode them, tell us much about such matters as power relations, psychological identities, and class structures in the period and culture that generated the text in question. Indeed, if, as Foucault has taught us, all we have are representations rather than realities, of course we must look to those representations as cultural indexes.

Still, once the pendulum has swung as far as it has in its equation of mimesis and diegesis, representation and reference, mimesis and dianoia, it inevitably begins to move the other way. It happened in the late sixteenth century, in Sidney's eloquent *Defense of Poetry*, written in response to Stephen Gosson's Puritan pamphlet *The School of Abuse* (1579). Gosson, a recent Oxford graduate and acquaintance of Sidney's, used elaborate euphuistic mannerisms to attack lyric poets, dramatists, and writers of epic as "caterpillars of the Commonwealth," drones who produce trivial and corrupt work (Jacobson 286). Sidney, to whom *The School of Abuse* was (ironically?) dedicated, rose to the challenge: in his *Defense*, he makes an inspiring case for "Poesie" as "an arte of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in his word *Mimesis*, that is to say, a

representing, counterfetting, a figuring forth: to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture: with the end, to teach and to delight" (25).

Here the Aristotelian and Horatian concepts of *poiēsis* come together in what was to be the established view of poetry for centuries to come. Gosson's attack on the poet as corrupter of youth, an idea no doubt derived from Plato, is famously sidestepped by Sidney's contention that "[t]he poet nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth" (52). For Sidney, the poet is above all a maker (*poiētēs*), the creator of an invented world, superior to our own. It was a doctrine revived by the Romantics and again by the modernists—for example, Wallace Stevens, who insisted in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," written on the eve of World War II, that "[a] possible poet must be a poet capable of resisting or evading the pressure of the reality of this last degree [of violence]" (27). And a few pages later: "what makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it" (31). If poetry is the supreme fiction, or, in Ezra Pound's more practical terms, "[n]ews that STAYS news," then the study of literature cannot assign to the texts in question a merely instrumental value. As Adorno put it, "The greatness of works of art . . . consists solely in the fact that they give voice to what ideology hides" (39).

A specter is haunting the academy, the specter of literature. Just this year, the Marxist theorist Terry Eagleton, currently a professor of cultural theory at Manchester University and the author of *Literary Theory* and *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, has published a book called *How to Read a Poem*. His opening chapter, "The Functions of Criticism," begins, "I first thought of writing this book when I realized that hardly any of the students of literature I encountered these days practiced what I myself had been trained

to regard as literary criticism. Like thatching or clog dancing, literary criticism seems to be something of a dying art" (1). It is not, Eagleton goes on to say, that students don't read texts closely. "Close reading is not the issue. The question is not how tenaciously you cling to the text, but what you are in search of when you do so." Students today, he worries, are only taught "content analysis":

They give accounts of works of literature which describe what is going on in them, perhaps with a few evaluative comments thrown in. To adapt a technical distinction from linguistics, they treat the poem as *language* but not as *discourse*. "Discourse" . . . means attending to language in all of its material density, whereas most approaches to poetic language tend to disembodify it. . . . It would be hard to figure out, just by reading most of these content analyses, that they were supposed to be about poems or novels rather than about some real-life happening. What gets left out is the *literariness* of the work. . . . [T]hey treat the poem as though its author chose for some eccentric reason to write out his or her views on warfare or sexuality in lines which do not reach to the end of the page. Maybe the computer got stuck. (2–3)

I think this is right on the mark. I have heard graduate students discussing the vagaries of Romantic self-consciousness in Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" who cannot tell you what an ode is, what apostrophe is, or why (much less how) this one is written in terza rima. But whose fault is this? Not that of theory, for consider—and I concur with Eagleton—the excellent theorists, from Roman Jakobson and William Empson to Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, who have written superb critical commentary on particular poems (2). Rather, Eagleton posits, the culprit is "a specific way of life." "What threatens to scupper verbal sensitivity," according to Eagleton, "is the depthless, commodified, instantly legible world of advanced capitalism, with its unscrupulous way with signs, com-

puterized communication and glossy packaging of ‘experience.’” Indeed, “what is at peril on our planet is *experience itself*” (17).

It sounds ominous: Eagleton’s is only the latest in a series of books and articles that posit the death of literature (see, for example, William Marx’s *L’adieu à la littérature*, of 2005) and bemoan the inability of the young to read any piece of prose, much less poetry, longer than a few pages. But my own experience has been quite otherwise. Who, for starters, is to say what constitutes an “experience” and which people are incapable of having one? And does late capitalism really “scupper” that “sensitivity” to poetic language, a sensitivity that was presumably intact during capitalism’s earlier, less global stages? On the contrary, my hunch is that the “computerized communication” Eagleton dismisses nostalgically is precisely the medium that is generating a renewed interest in poetry as well as in literary studies: witness the intense debate on particular poetic issues on the Internet. To return to Beckett for a moment, the centennial events I spoke of earlier are posted, along with major Beckett texts, commentaries, reviews, and visual sources, on an anonymous site called *Samuel Beckett Resources and Links* (samuel-beckett.net). This and other Beckett sites receive thousands of hits.

Indeed, the trickle-down effect of such Internet activity is beginning to transform the university classroom Eagleton speaks of so sadly. On *PennSound* (www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/), a site cofounded in January 2005 by Charles Bernstein and Al Filreis at the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing, you can, with a click, hear Gertrude Stein read her tongue-in-cheek homage poem to T. S. Eliot called “The Fifteenth of November” (1924) or George Oppen read, in his quiet, sometimes breaking voice, his long serial poem “Of Being Numerous” (1968) or even Vladimir Mayakovsky’s “Iz ulitsi v’ulitsu” (“From Street to Street”), read by the poet’s mistress, Lili Brik.

The unique feature of *PennSound* is that one needn’t hear complete recordings of this or that poet but can choose precisely the poem one wants. Each poet, moreover, has his or her own page, giving us titles, sources, playing times, and, for poems not in English, the written text in the original and translation.

It goes without saying that these tools revolutionize the poetry classroom. At Kenneth Goldsmith’s *UbuWeb* (www.ubu.com), which covers experimental writing—sound poetry, concrete poetry, performance—from Apollinaire and Marinetti to the present, you can now also see such art films as Marcel Duchamp’s *Anemic Cinema* and Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*. As little as ten years ago, an instructor friend who wanted to show Smithson’s film to her students in a course on language in visual art had to pay a large sum for the rental of the film print, and the copy took weeks to arrive. Now it is right there for anyone with a Web browser to access. Thousands of writers, artists, students, professors, and just plain interested parties around the world are visiting these esoteric Web sites and blogs and reading or listening to difficult avant-garde texts. Then, too, via *PennSound*, students in New Zealand or Santiago can hear Penn’s John Richetti reading Pope’s *Rape of the Lock* or David Wallace reading Chaucer’s Pardoner’s Tale, which is, in turn, parodied in Caroline Bergvall’s contemporary riff on Chaucer, also online.

But—I am often asked—won’t this digital mania marginalize The Book even more? Will anyone read, say, an entire Victorian novel when one can cruise the Net, accessing sound bites from *Bleak House* or synopses of *Wuthering Heights*? Here a little anecdote from popular culture might be apposite.

Many of you will recall last year’s brouhaha in response to Oprah Winfrey’s selection of *A Million Little Pieces*, a memoir of addiction and recovery by a young Hollywood screenwriter named James Frey, for her book club in September 2005. The previous

year, Oprah had been justly praised for choosing such classics as *Anna Karenina* and three Faulkner novels: *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Light in August*. Sales of Tolstoy's novel, which had been running about 12,000 copies a year in the new Penguin translation of Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (2001), jumped, thanks to Oprah, to 900,000 in 2004 (Malpas). But this sales figure, spectacular as it is for a classic, was nothing compared with that of Oprah's next selection, *A Million Little Pieces*, which had sold 1.77 million copies in four months when, in January 2006, it was exposed by the Web site *The Smoking Gun* as being largely a fabrication ("Million Little Lies"). The author, it seems, had invented many of the book's sordid and sensational incidents. On national television, Oprah now confronted Frey, telling him that he had "betrayed millions of readers" and that she herself had been "duped." In a rare show of anger, she accused Doubleday (now a Random House imprint), the memoir's publisher, of having failed to employ the proper fact-checkers. After much legal wrangling, Doubleday agreed to add a disclaimer to all subsequent copies of the book—a disclaimer in which Frey admits that he "embellished" the story but maintains that the basic purpose of the book, originally written as a novel, had not appreciably been altered. "Ultimately," he protests, "it's a story, and one that I could not have written without having lived the life I've lived" (Wyatt).

This is a cautionary tale, but not for those who want to learn about substance abuse and recovery. Frey's novel had been turned down by seventeen publishers before Doubleday's Nan Talese accepted it on the condition that the author revise it as a memoir ("Million Little Lies"). The decision to publish *A Million Little Pieces* in its new form was based, of course, on a single consideration—the bottom line. If Oprah was duped, she was duped primarily by Frey's publisher. How, for example, could fact-checkers, who are after all only

office employees, have done the necessary detective work, eventually performed, ironically, not by anyone in the print publishing world but by the Web site *The Smoking Gun*, which used interviews with law enforcement personnel, police reports, and court records to come to its well-documented conclusions?

The narrative's alleged authenticity, which so enchanted Oprah that she couldn't put the book down, raises large issues about the probity of commercial publishers and the power of the Internet to act as whistle blower. More important, it raises those basic literary questions I posed earlier. What is the relation of truth to fiction? Can a memoir invent or embellish incidents and still be "true" to the author's experience? Rousseau certainly thought so, as did the Goethe of *Dichtung und Wahrheit* and the Elias Canetti of *The Tongue Set Free*. Is Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* a novel or a memoir? And what about *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, subtitled "as told to Alex Haley"? To cite Aristotle once more, "What is convincing though impossible should always be preferred to what is possible and unconvincing."

A related question—and here we turn to literary history—has to do with genre and convention. To study the nature of narrative is to come to *A Million Little Pieces* with a horizon of expectations rather different from that of Oprah and her core readership. For what is *A Million Little Pieces* but an up-to-date, steamy version of the addiction-recovery paradigm found in such classics as De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* or Baudelaire's *Le vin et le hashish* or, closer to home, William Burroughs's *Junky*, the ultimate addiction narrative? The to-hell-and-back curve of Frey's "memoir" is the familiar curve of conversion narratives, beginning with the dramatic opening of chapter 3 of Augustine's *Confessions*: "To Carthage then I came, where a cauldron of unholy loves sang all about mine ears." And what is probably the greatest to-hell-and-back story of all, Dante's *Inferno*, begins, like Frey's, at rock bottom, as the narrator finds himself

in a “dark forest,” the *via diritta* or way out wholly blocked to him.

Who then is being duped here, and how? You may recall that in 2004 the National Endowment for the Arts issued a report called *Reading at Risk*, which concluded ominously, from a survey of respondents who were asked how many “literary” works (novels or short stories, poems, and plays) they had read in the preceding year, that the current “cultural crisis” is such that “literary reading as a leisure activity will virtually disappear in half a century” (Gioia xiii). But what is literary reading, and is it confined to books? If, for example, Frey had managed to publish *A Million Little Pieces* as the novel it was meant to be, would reading this book count toward the kind of cultural literacy the NEA report takes to be essential? Is reading fiction, never mind what fiction, always preferable to reading an essay, like the one from *The Smoking Gun*? And what about the values of book production? When Penguin, one of the most distinguished publishers, brought out the Pevear translation of *Anna Karenina* in 2001, its cover depicted the nude knees of a woman with a bouquet of flowers held by her right hand between her knees. This was the edition picked up by the Oprah Book Club, the edition that sold 900,000 copies. *Anna Karenina*, anyone?

Where, then, do we as teachers of language and literature come in? If we choose to assign Tolstoy’s great novel in a given course, as I hope many of us will, we should begin with some large and basic literary questions. First, theory: what is a novel, and how does its fictionality relate to truth? Levin, the male hero of *Anna*, although one wouldn’t know this from the Penguin cover or the publicity machine, was, after all, based closely on Tolstoy himself, and so questions of truth and reality are particularly pressing in the case of this so-called realistic novel. What is the narrative’s point of view, and how does language work in articulating it? Why do readers, more than a hundred years after the book’s publica-

tion, continue to be enthralled by *Anna Karenina*, when presumably *A Million Little Pieces* will have vanished from literary and cultural memory by next year? What, in short, makes a novel *News that Stays News*?

Then literary history and geography: where do we place this particular novel in the larger literary field? *Anna Karenina*’s adultery story is, in one sense, as old as the hills—think of Clytemnestra’s betrayal of Agamemnon—and in another both historically based in late-nineteenth-century bourgeois culture and peculiar to Russian society in the wake of the emancipation of the serfs and in the light of the coming revolution. And finally literary criticism, which can only work if we read very closely and evaluatively. *Anna* is a great test case because it seems at one level to be so ordinary, its narrative more or less writing itself. No elaborate fictional devices like flashbacks and multiple narrators, little metaphor, allusion, or stylization. And yet nothing is stranger than this particular ordinariness, beginning with the opening sentence, “Happy families are all alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” This sentence, incidentally, which I cite from Aylmer Maude’s translation, is rendered slightly differently by Pevear: “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” If we could read the novel in Russian—and we should encourage as much study of literature in its original language as possible—we would obviously be in a better position to understand the import of this opening.

But in either case, Tolstoy’s meaning is elusive. Is the distinction made here his? The omniscient narrator’s? The perspective of Stiva or Dolly Oblonsky, whose broken marriage begins this story? That of the common wisdom of Tolstoy’s day? Or is this sentence as sardonic as Jane Austen’s “It is a truth universally acknowledged . . .”? By the time we finish *Anna*, we have learned that even the “happiest” families, like Levin and Kitty’s, are not really happy at all. You will recall that

in one of the novel's last chapters, when Levin is living in the country with his adored Kitty and their new baby, the narrator tells us that "though he was a happy and healthy family man, Levin was several times so near to suicide that he hid a cord he had lest he should hang himself, and he feared to carry a gun lest he should shoot himself" (Maude 714). But he does not hang himself, any more than Gogo and Didi hang themselves from that lone, leafless tree in *Godot*, and it would be a fascinating project to determine how these utterly unlike hanging scenes might relate to each other. In Tolstoy's world, a world not nearly as dark as Beckett's, humor is in short supply, and Levin cannot shake off his anxieties by laughing at himself. Why is that?

Contemplating such questions, those of us who teach literature may come to see that we have a lot more expertise than we think we have. It is time to trust the literary instinct that brought us to this field in the first place and to recognize that, instead of lusting after those other disciplines that seem so exotic primarily because we don't really practice them, what we need is more theoretical, historical, and critical training in our own discipline. Rhapsodes, it turns out, can and should serve a real function in our oral, print, and digital culture. Supply and demand, or perhaps I should say, surveying the Beckett field of 2006, demand and supply: the time is fast coming, I believe, when this basic law must and will operate in our favor.

WORKS CITED

- Adorno, Theodor W. "On Lyric Poetry and Society." 1957. *Notes to Literature*. Vol. 1. Ed. Rolf Tiedeman. Trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen. New York: Columbia UP, 1974. 37–54.
- Aristotle. *The Poetics*. Trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe. Loeb Classics. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1960.
- Beckett, Samuel. *En attendant Godot / Waiting for Godot*. Bilingual ed. New York: Grove, 2006.
- Borderless Beckett: International Samuel Beckett Symposium in Tokyo*. 2006. 27 Feb. 2007 <<http://beckettjapan.org/borderless2.htm>>.
- Caselli, Daniella. "Beckett at Reading 2006." *The Beckett Circle / Le cercle de Beckett* 29.2 (2006): 2–3.
- Eagleton, Terry. *How to Read a Poem*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007.
- Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980.
- Frey, James. *A Note to the Reader*. 1 Feb. 2006. Random House. 28 Aug. 2006 <<http://www.randomhouse.biz/media/pdfs/AMLPO20106.pdf>>.
- Gioia, Dana, ed. *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*. Washington: Natl. Endowment for the Arts, 2004.
- Hamilton, Edith, and Huntington Cairns, eds. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*. Bollingen Ser. 71. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1961.
- Jacobson, Daniel. "Philip Sidney." *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*. Vol. 4. Ed. Michael Kelly. New York: Oxford UP, 1998. 286–87.
- Malpas, Anna. "Oprah's Pick." *Context*. 25 June 2004. 27 Feb. 2007 <<http://context.themoscowtimes.com/stories/2004/06/25/101.html>>.
- Maude, Aylmer, trans. *Anna Karenina*. By Leo Tolstoy. Ed. George Gibian. Norton Critical Ed. New York: Norton, 1995.
- "A Million Little Lies: Exposing James Frey's Fiction Addiction." *The Smoking Gun*. 8 Jan. 2006. 27 Feb. 2007 <<http://www.thesmokinggun.com/archive/0104061jamesfrey1.htm>>.
- Plato. *Ion*. Trans. Lane Cooper. Hamilton and Cairns 216–28.
- . *The Republic*. Trans. Paul Shorey. Hamilton and Cairns 575–844.
- Sedano, Michael. "Reading *Waiting for Godot* in Translation." *La Bloga*. 7 Nov. 2006. 27 Feb. 2007 <<http://labloga.blogspot.com/2006/11/reading-waiting-for-godot-in.html>>.
- Sidney, Philip. *A Defense of Poetry*. Ed. Jan A. Van Dorsten. New York: Oxford UP, 1966.
- Stevens, Wallace. "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." 1942. *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. New York: Random, 1965. 1–36.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Zettel*. Ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright. Trans. Anscombe. Berkeley: U of California P, 1967.
- Wyatt, Edward. "Oprah Calls Defense of Author 'a Mistake.'" *New York Times* 26 Jan. 2006. 27 Feb. 2007 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/26/books/26cnd-oprah.html>>.