

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Does Literature Exist? A Transnational Symposium

Kirpal Singh: The Humanology of Exchange: Celebrating Challenge and Response

Several years ago my eldest daughter was reading and re-reading and re-re-reading *Sophie's Choice*. When I asked her what was so engaging about this book she said to me, 'Have you seen/watched *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*?' I hadn't and said so. Some years after this conversation, I was crossing the Atlantic and took the opportunity to watch this strange, moving film: it has been one of the more profound filmic texts I have experienced and one which comes to mind as I read and reread the statements/texts below. These began with the provocative, albeit witty and charming, first statement by Robert Lumsden. It occurred to me that it might not be a bad idea to invite a few colleagues in the domain to respond to Lumsden's implicit challenge. I am reminded of Keats' utterance: 'Heard melodies are sweet/But those unheard are sweeter.' How? In what specific sense? Why?

When I was young and learning to type on an old Olivetti, the first sentence I was given was: The quick brown fox jumps right over the lazy dog. I was told that this sentence contains all the letters of the English alphabet. I don't think at that point this 'truth' mattered very much to me – I am still not sure if it matters much even now. But I diligently followed the instruction and managed to impress those around me with my typing skills. Was this talent/knowledge? Or a mere copying of an age-old habit? I remember distinctly that in addition to this sentence I also typed, of my own volition because I liked the song so much,

Hang down your head Tom Dooley
 Hang down your head and cry
 Hang down your head Tom Dooley
 Poor boy you're bound to die...

It was a big hit over the radio in those days and it didn't matter whether my spelling was right or my humming/singing was right – it did matter that I had it learnt by heart and must have typed it no less than a few hundred times!

This fascination with letters, words, possibilities and extensions and connections led me to a profound appreciation of the real value of literature and literary expression: the sheer capacity to help the imagination both grasp reality and extend its boundaries. At University when studying *Gulliver's Travels* (a text I strongly recommend we all reread) I came across a fascinating essay entitled 'The Scatological Imagination: An Essay on Jonathan Swift.' Again, the accurate title itself and the author's name (if I recall right it is Norman Brown...) do not, now, matter as much as the impact the essay made on me then – it was one of those odd 'defining moments' of my literary ambition and one which led me to always think of new ways of looking at texts – often to the frustration of my teachers, especially at the University of Singapore, who, in their well-meaning intentions did not take kindly to those who insisted on offering fresh/new perspectives – such, such are the ways in which we mould our students with our sensibilities!

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It is my fervent belief that only through a frank, honest and even passionate exchange of ideas is our fundamental humanity realised, enriched and expanded. Does Literature Exist? Do I exist? Do you, dear reader? Does anything exist? Some will consider this silly, if not outrightly dim-witted, others might dismiss it as academic and yet others may be bemused, thinking, well, at least there's some level of discussion/debate. But whatever one's own perspectives may be, unless and until they are confidently articulated they do not impact on the world and thus remain impotent. In publishing Lumsden's text and the accompanying responses (and this brief Introduction) the aim is to widen the parameters of discourse, the sites for innumerable contestations. My vocabulary here is deliberate – like Tom Dooley, literature is today under extreme threat and it is this way because the consumerist ethos of today's broad politics does not want to be challenged in any serious way by the acuteness of inquiry which a good, learned literary mind encourages. The spaces between being taken in and being aware are becoming increasingly blurred in an environment more bent upon showing than being.

I hope that you, dear readers, will contribute to the discussion which is here presented.

Robert Lumsden

Literature, notoriously, can't be defined. Or can it?

Traditionalist supporters of standards and wanton relativists both behave as though it can. Or as though it ought to be. Or as though it doesn't matter that it can't.

It's an odd dispute. Advantage switches back and forth across a terrain littered with the cadavers of sacred cows and the spectral images of the degradation of culture. Each side seems at times to have the best of it, depending on your point of vantage, and each at times seems to be riding towards the sound of gunfire facing backwards on a donkey.

Anti-traditionalists have a point in their attack on canonicity. Much as we might venerate Shakespeare and suspect that it is not a wonderful idea to drop Blake, or Milton, or A.B. Paterson from curricula to make room for Batman, traditionalists have a tough job trying to produce good reasons for their preferences. Champions of culture are hard pressed to persuade a novice reader to control a Harry Potter addiction in favour of internalizing the Shakespearean idiolect. Even the QCs of academe tend to look bad when harrumphing about standards rather than explaining what these are, exactly.

The customary reasons for cleaving to the classics might be correct: their invitation to a sense of the wider world superior to anything likely to be got from analyzing the backs of Weetbix packets, a satisfaction undreamt of in the narcissistic repetitions of *The Young and the Beautiful*, an engagement of the imagination better than anything offered by such masterpieces of passive observance as *Spiderman*. It's a pity that being right isn't necessarily enough. The way things stand, being loud can often take you further.

But what if the global bunfight is altogether irrelevant? What if these combatants across the cultural divide are quarrelling about a word they hold in common only insofar as they use it differently?

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Neither legion talks much about the way literature functions, you might have noticed, the way it works as a piece of fluent machinery. It is curious, isn't it, that so little effort should be devoted to discovering what you're talking about before you tear into squabbling over it? To claim that literature is whatever constitutes the canon – more or less the traditionalist view – and claiming that it is whatever the individual thinks it is – a somewhat synoptic anti-traditionalist position – is to provide equally shaky underpinnings for further *pronunciamentos*. The positions these two sentences represent are dogmas, not arguments. Yet they are commonly offered as though a case could be made simply by turning up the volume.

The first group, the traditionalist, tries to 'define' literature by compiling lists of works which contain it – an obvious circularity. The second tries to tie literature to its function in popular culture – a species of crude utilitarianism. Or it 'defines' literature as whatever the consumer considers it to be at the moment of consumption – a form of solipsist idealism which doesn't even offer the invitation to self-analysis of some nineteenth century Romanticisms.

What, then, might it mean to think literature differently?

The most formidable obstruction to liberation from the political right, left, and centre is a pernicious subject-object game we've inherited from the debates in philosophy of previous centuries, the nineteenth in particular. We're primed to scrutinize all texts through this flawed glass.

Break it, and ask: what if literature is the name of an activity neither quite subjective nor objective, but something which cuts across such categories? What if it is an expectation rather than a thing? The name for a state of mind we bring to the reading of some texts, but not to others?

It should be said at once that this expectation is not a version of the 'whatever I feel about it is the truth' theory of reading – not a version of vulgar reader response criticism. It is more grand than an expectation; closer to a disposition to behold in a certain elevated manner which is near to the state of mind of the speaker of Philip Larkin's poem 'Church Going'.

Entering a church in rural England, the speaker in the poem is hushed by thought of the devotedness of those who have gone prayerfully before him. Unbeliever though he be, a charisma of the object – the church and what it represents – touches to life something finer than the normal run of his thoughts and feelings.

*It pleases me to stand in silence here;
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in.*

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The approach to literature taken at its highest pitch is similar to this. A charm of the possible about the text calls up an expectation of the extraordinary in the reader. This is of course far from an 'anything goes' reader response, where not only need there be no sense of literature as something which speaks to the extraordinary in the reader's sensibility, but a lowest common denominator of experience is often gleefully or perversely embraced.

In literature taken as a disposition to experience with this type of heightened expectation, it could not be assumed that one man's Captain Marvel is as good as the next man's Shakespeare without wheeling on heavy support for so bold a statement. The comparison might turn out to be true, but couldn't pass by reason of the *chutzpah* shown in making it.

This expectation is subtle and complex, but it is not opaque.

Among its many possible characteristics is a belief that the book we take up might lift us out of our normal states of mind or of consciousness. We expect, perhaps, to be informed (which is nearly the opposite of being pandered to). We anticipate the possibility that the stuff we're made of – there is no need for the moment to ask what this is – might be rewoven into something finer by the time we've closed the last page. We hope to be intrigued to a point beyond anything which was possible for us a moment before opening the book. We hope, even, for illumination.

The reader embracing this notion of the literary is disposed to be set down on an unanticipated path; to be in some sense completed, or undermined, to have some aesthetic sense confirmed or renewed. ('Aesthetic' is open to discussion, of course. That is an essential aspect of this view: that such a sliding scale 'definition' does demand the location of meanings which otherwise tend to be assumed.)

In this image of literature, the reader naturally excludes canonicity as a precept too external to himself to account for the particularities of his experience. And she excludes subjectivity as too loose a term to describe those nuances of response by which a good work is distinguished from something trivial, an accomplished book from a great one.

What practical value is there in defining literature in this way?

Apart from blessed relief from the dinning tedium of the pro-traditionalist vs pro-post-modernity gladiatorial encounter, there are two advantages, whose consequences are difficult to overestimate. The more fundamental is the reinstatement of truth as the goal of enquiry. This was once the fashion in the humanities, though it tests credulity now to say so.

If this is indeed the way literature really functions when permitted to do what it does best, we would be bound insofar as we think of ourselves as clear-eyed seekers after wisdom rather than vassals of expediency to follow our discovery wherever it leads. *Wherever*; including if necessary deficit funding of education systems to reduce audiences at all levels from the size of a small football crowd to groups which would fit around a coffee shop table.

The second reason for reading literature with respect concerns an opportunity to toss the rotweilers of philistinism an argument from political improvement to gnaw on. We have done too little for too long in the way of pressing the claims of practical

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advantage to be had from encouraging people to read with a comprehensive intelligence. Prevented from reading as well as we might be by the glitz-obsessed dogmas which constitute many of the conventions of education in our rapidly ageing new world – Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States – we are less sensitive to the interpretation of signs in general than we would otherwise be, and worse citizens in consequence.

As an inevitable effect of our tricking up and talking down of literature, the polity is less sharp-witted than it has a right to be. Semi-literate, we put ourselves into the hands of those who manage words better than we. Insofar as we live and breathe and have our being in a self-congratulatory glibness, the State totters, as one of Shakespeare's machievels says states founded on too little learning must.

Yes, literature exists, fortunately. The trouble is that some of us keep forgetting how to find it.

Richard Deming

Currently, a great many texts that are not recognizable as literature are being taught in what were traditionally literature departments. Advertising, film, political tracts, newspapers, shipping logs, sermons, and so forth are now possible objects that are being read with a view to how they represent and transmit values, ideas, and ideals of a given culture and historical moment. It is increasingly true that for many scholars and academics any cultural object can be a text and these texts do not necessarily inspire and vivify, but rather provide foci by which we might sound the depths of ideology and the social construction of value and power. Even the privileging of literature as a specific kind of cultural production that imparts truth and greatness is a social construction that only serves to mystify works that are deemed as literature. I am not sure, ultimately, that Robert Lumsden's short essay gets us out of the problem he identifies by insisting on the fact that what we bring to a text is not always already determined by social conventions and mores. So, the heightened expectation he mentions as being the way that literature is recognised and even defined would be similar to what the traditionalists of whom he seems to be skeptical would offer as the marker of enduring works of literature. A traditionalist would be apt to believe that there is some undeniable value in literature that is apodictically true. That is what makes it literature, and any right thinking, sensitive person – or so the argument goes – would see a work of literature as literature. Of course, that is not the whole story.

To begin with, Robert Lumsden gives us a false question – 'does literature exist?' he asks, and although we can't necessarily point to a stable set of criteria or definitions that marks that category, clearly there is something called *literature* that everyone agrees to as in fact existing, and so the word continues to circulate. He does this in order, I think, to rhetorically get us to be open to what is his real concern – that literature not only exists but that it names, in part, rather than a series or set of elements, a kind of comportment towards certain kinds of texts – a stance or a set of expectations within the viewer that might be really what that elusive sense of 'the literary' might entail. The issue may

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involve something other than whether or not there is a kind of discourse and a body of works that one refers to as *literature*, but rather what it means when we call something *literature*. We ask then, what is it that we do with literature that we do not do to menus or train schedules or grocery lists or even legal briefs. Lately, I have been thinking that the question is not what is literature, but rather what is 'the literary,' if we see the latter term as referring to the properties that make a text able to be called literature at all. We can see that 'the literary' has something to do with making reading into an active proposition, the rendering of interpretation as a process that we engage in and by which we fashion meaning and meaningfulness. If this is a generally phenomenological concern, so be it. But I would offer that questions of meaning need not be a pursuit of truth – this might be my one real disagreement with Lumsden, but it is a profound one – but a question of how language and representation can be invested with significance.

At the same time, however, I agree with Lumsden's general emphasis that the issue lies not with texts themselves and what might constitute the features or criteria that make them literary. Rather, the concern about literature and the literary is an inquiry into literature as being the set of possibilities of a certain kind of experience of language. I have myself argued that this comportment suggests how literature necessitates an ethics of reading – which is to say, the interpretive processes of reading literary texts bring to bear a need to examine how we examine literature because literature – and on this Lumsden's traditionalists as well as those who level post-modern critiques of canonicity are apt to agree – contributes to our understanding of how we say things, how we use language to represent experience not only to others but to ourselves as well.

If we are to get to the sense of urgency and threat that Lumsden so obviously feels, I wish that he had provided some concrete examples other than comic books of things that are excluded from the canon – the canon does not comprise a set of only those texts that are literature; these texts are exemplars of literature, these are the models against which any literary text will be judged. In many ways, literature is spared some of the anxiety that is part and particle of other disciplines. Philosophy, for instance, never forgets that pervasive threat that whatever idea being articulated may not actually be philosophy, but may in fact be a form of sophistry. In other words, in philosophy there are worse things than being wrong. At the same time, I would say that the process of interpretation is indeed ongoing, that we are always weighing our words, worrying their applicability, testing their rightness or wrongness and that is true whenever and wherever we encounter language, including comic books and sitcoms. Literature is a field of texts that resists interpretation enough that we can see its processes – it is the exception that proves the rule.

Lumsden is right to say that there can be no actual definition of literature in a way that would allow us to reduce the essence of literature to a set of criteria by which we could verify or deny the literariness of discrete written texts. Instead, what we can go by, fallible as it is, is a set of family resemblances amongst texts. This might point us to one way of identifying the literary as a text self-conscious, or at least self-aware, of its own constructedness, its own existence as a language object and the fact that it creates worlds and realities that are counterfactual and, in short, made. Such texts are not trying to

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communicate information but to make evident the ways that language itself constitutes experience. Indeed, the literary provides the means for experiencing our own experiences in our thinking through and thinking by the very words we share with the text itself. Literature is constructed a word at a time, just as all of us are. By this I mean to say that literature is no completed project so that corpus continues to be challenged and expanded all of the time. Times being what they are at any moment, new texts that speak to and for that time come into being. Literature is in the process of unfolding. I agree with Lumsden that what needs attention is the way we respond to such self-conscious texts, not personally but in larger terms of significance. The literary is what resists the intelligence almost successfully, the act of the mind finding itself so that we come upon our own meaning making mechanisms and front their essential facts.

Brodie Beales

Yes, of course literature exists (exaggerated rolling of eyes). We learn this in school (along with right and wrong and the importance of consensus, majorities and growing up quickly) because we're forced to read it. The Education Department lays down a mandated reading list, a list that goes on to create an understanding of the role of writing that has shaped our nation's idea of literature as something more than simply 'a good book' even if we never really know why. Evidence of the seminal role played by our high school English education may be found wherever public opinion on books is sought. Witness the recent rash of top 100 books of all time polls (the national poll being a television 'Special Event' broadcast by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation) that exhorted the people of Australia to vote on their favourite book.¹ Number four was *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a mainstay of Australian secondary school curricula for the past 30 years or more. It was beaten by *The Bible* and *Pride and Prejudice* both of which were overtaken in a triumphant march to the top spot by *Lord of the Rings*. Shakespeare didn't make the top ten. J.K. Rowling did (with book five entitled *Harry Potter and The Order of the Phoenix*). *Cloudstreet* by Tim Winton did (comprehensively beaten into fifth place by Harper Lee) perhaps demonstrating the voting demographic. *Cloudstreet* is a relatively new addition to Australian High School English curricula.

To Kill a Mockingbird hasn't topped best-seller lists for years. It isn't a part of what is traditionally termed The Literary Canon, but it appears consistently in lists of the greatest books, favourite books, top picks and great reads. To top it all off the movie is in Black and White (gasp!). I have no evidence to back me up on this point but I suspect that most of the people who voted for it don't even own a copy (and if they do I'd check for a 'property of XXXX high school' stamp on the inside front cover). But most people of my generation educated in Australia remember it and they remember it because it meant something to them (despite their being forced to read it). It wasn't tricky and you didn't need to decode it, what it did do was drag out things you'd never quite formed into questions and made you give that loose bundle of ideas and preconceptions your full

¹ For the results of this poll see: <http://www.abc.net.au/myfavouritebook/top10/100.htm> (archived site)

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attention as a part of your reading process. *To Kill a Mockingbird* meant something to its audience because it took the reader a place that they'd never been before and challenged them to feelings they never quite forgot. Its themes were epic but its context was human and the reader entered into a web of relationships from which they were unable to extricate themselves. Scout has re-emerged as a name for children, as has Harper. In short, it went beyond a plot device, some characters, a premise to demonstrate and an end to reach. To paraphrase Lumsden: the book lifted the reader out of their normal states of mind or of consciousness and took the stuff they're made of and returned it, rewoven into something finer, by the time they'd closed the last page. This isn't something easily forgotten and is life changing when you're 15.

Literature exists because people need to be moved, people need to explore. It exists because we hunger to know the other, *any* other, from the inside out. One reads a guidebook, devours a thriller, meanders through a memoir or wafts through a romance but one enters into a relationship with literature. Literature doesn't tell you how the world *is*, it pries open possibilities within its audience. Literature echoes. Literature lingers. Countless books will have passed through the hands of voters in the national poll in the years that followed those Wednesday afternoon English classes, but *To Kill a Mockingbird* lingered. Not because it's quotable or because it's syntactically dazzling or learnedly clever, rather because of the spotlight it made us turn on the world, on the reality of other people as something that existed apart and distinct from our idea of who and how they should be. Galileo said 'you can never teach a man anything, you can only help him find it for himself'. In time we turned the light on ourselves and starting thinking, questioning and feeling. Yes, we'd had the stuff of which we were made refined, but for the first time we had a sense of what that stuff *could* be. For a moment we did indeed 'see our compulsions recognized and robed as destinies', and knew that much in the light of this gaze would never be obsolete.

Peter Nazareth

Robert Lumsden makes statements about positions taken on literature by scholars without describing or defining those positions and without naming the scholars. The piece uses words that seem to be sarcastic and sometimes arrogant without providing proof for the reader that the author is generalizing accurately from what he actually knows in some detail. For example, who are the 'wanton relativists'? Why are they 'wanton'? What are the 'cadavers of sacred cows'? Who are the 'traditionalists' mentioned in the same paragraph who 'have a tough job trying to produce good reasons for their prejudices'? What are these prejudices and why is it a tough job to produce reasons for them? What are the 'masterpieces of passive observance' and why is *Spiderman* a good example? Why say 'masterpieces' when the author means the direct opposite? What is 'passive observance'? Is reading a comic book a passive act? Is the observance of movies passive? With the phrase 'isn't it', line 2 of paragraph 7 sounds just like a Bugs Bunny cartoon.

Then, to my surprise, Lumsden gets to the heart of the matter. He asks, 'what if literature is the name of an activity neither quite subjective nor objective, but something

that cuts across such categories?’ He provides as a quintessential example a poem by Philip Larkin, a poem which he shows is about, and proves by analysis that it achieves, an elevation of the state of mind of the reader. The paragraphs that follow expand and clarify, despite some sarcasm and statements that cry out for explanation, e.g. ‘*Prevented from reading* as well as we might be by the glitz-obsessed dogmas which constitute many of the conventions of education in our rapidly ageing new world’ (my emphasis).

The piece seems to be deliberately provocative, written in catchy, sometimes charming, English which we can enjoy – and then we need to go on a search to find perspectives to reinforce or contradict what has been said. Taking a cue, or more accurately a cudgel, from the tone of the piece, I suggest that readers look at my literary criticism, the newest work being *Edwin Thumboo: Creating a Nation Through Poetry*.² Singapore is not listed in the ‘rapidly ageing new world’ of the author, which includes ‘Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States’: so Thumboo and I, coming from other worlds – although I am a Professor in the United States, I was born in Uganda of Goan parents, my mother being born in Malaya – are not ‘[p]revented from reading as well as we might’ by ‘glitz-obsessed dogmas’ of ‘the conventions of education’. I feel free to seek not only different literary contents but also to create different forms of literary criticism, such as arguing that the fiction of Andrew Salkey (Jamaican), Francis Ebejer (Maltese), and Ishmael Reed (African American) are *In the Trickster Tradition*.³

Does literature exist? In asking and answering the question, *the piece* makes claims without distracting us with footnotes, the strategy I use in my Thumboo book, and then gets down to business with the analysis of one well chosen poem. Endnotes would have changed the lightness of being, interrupting the flow of what I would call reverse metaphors such as ‘each at times seems to be riding towards the sound of gunfire facing backwards on a donkey.’ It is right for me to call it *a piece* because it sounds like music.

Gillian Dooley

My first academic conference was a miserable experience. A fairly conventional lit-crit PhD student, I made the mistake of taking my new-minted chapter on Doris Lessing to a cultural studies conference. My paper was in a session paralleled by one on werewolves, and the few hardheads who resisted the lure of the fabled beast and heard my presentation were savage. Everything about me was out of place, from an old-fashioned interest in point of view and fictional ethics (as opposed to politics) to the clothes I was wearing.

Literature, I was directed to understand by a vociferous member of the audience, was not about empathy, as I seemed to be asserting. It was about justice. Lessing’s attempt to inhabit a point of view different to her own was to be seen as a political strategy, pure and simple: nothing to do with negative capability, or seeing other points of view candidly. This was a pivotal moment for me: although I was not able to fashion the perfect riposte at the time, I came to realise that the opinion my attacker had expressed

² Published in the Interlogue series, Ethos Books, Singapore, 2008.

³ The title of my book published by Bogle-L’Ouverture Publications, London, 1994.

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was so diametrically opposed to my own previously unformulated belief that its reverse became one of my axioms: literature is not a vehicle for expressing notions of justice, but an instrument for creating empathy. Once I had decided this point, I found many witnesses to agree with me, from Chekhov to D.H. Lawrence, from Henry James to Amos Oz, and perhaps now Robert Lumsden would allow me to add him to this list, when he says, 'The reader embracing this notion of the literary is disposed to be set down on an unanticipated path; to be in some sense completed, or undermined We would be bound . . . to follow our discovery wherever it leads.' The capacity to be sidetracked, or diverted along a different path, is fundamental, and is precisely what is missing from readings through a political or even, often, a theoretical lens.

I wonder, however, about the argument that 'political improvement' is to be had from reading literature. I would be more inclined to call it personal development: 'the rotweilers of philistinism' would presumably prefer to have their own political views comfortably endorsed, whereas I believe that the greatest literature by its nature fails to endorse any ideology. (I can still hear the sharp intake of breath when I expressed this opinion in a seminar: I not only dared to reject political usefulness in literature, but I compounded my naïveté by glibly talking of greatness.)

But nothing has happened in the ten years since that conference and seminar to change my mind. Of the hundreds of novels I have read over that decade, on top of the thousands I had already read, there are a few which stand out as great. They are, importantly, memorable not because of beautiful prose or clever imagery. As often as not the language is simple, even terse, and symbolism is where it belongs, in a subordinate position. What makes them memorable is an uncompromising, unsentimental clarity of vision: something steely and astonishing and sometimes even unpalatable. Novels like J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Christos Tsiolkas' *Dead Europe*, and Gail Jones' *Sorry* may all be susceptible to recruitment by a political cause, but only by means of an impoverished reading. As Coetzee says,

no matter what it may appear to be doing, the story may not really be playing the game you call Class Conflict or the game called Male Domination or any of the other games in the games handbook. While it may certainly be possible to read the book as playing one of those games, in reading it in that way you may have missed something. You may have missed not just something, you may have missed everything.⁴

Lumsden's cautious negotiation of canonicity reminds me of Wayne Booth's notion of 'coduction', the communal enterprise of criticism 'performed with a genuine respect both for one's own intuitions and for what other people have to say' rather than 'any deduction of quality from general ethical principles.'⁵ Iris Murdoch, who thought deeply and

⁴ J.M. Coetzee, 'The Novel Today,' *Upstream* 6.1 (Summer 1988): 4.

⁵ Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988): 76.

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steadily over many years on these subjects, would have concurred: 'Our aesthetic must stand to be judged by great works of art which we know to be such independently. ... So let us start by saying that Shakespeare is the greatest of all artists, and let our aesthetic grow to be the philosophical justification of this judgement.'⁶ For Shakespeare, of course, one must substitute one's own 'independent' or instinctive judgement of quality. In this way we read, yes, each from our own perspective, but without a ready-made template to fit over what we read to screen out everything that makes a work of literature its own unique self. We read with what Robert Alter called 'a readiness to be surprised.'⁷

⁶ Iris Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Good,' *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997) 205.

⁷ Robert Alter, 'A Readiness to be Surprised,' *Times Literary Supplement* 23 January 1998: 15.