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The Mode of Reading Appropriate to Literature

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The Mode of Reading Appropriate to Literature

Any work of imagination is a whole that, in order to be fully known, must be experienced. Its meaning is not an aggregate, achieved by a simple addition of parts. Rather, it is a totality, of which the elements are transformed by their relation to each other. Therefore, no single detail of a literary work should be lifted out of its context and subjected directly to logical scrutiny. Everything in a fictional world is related to every other thing in what literary critics call organic form. The task of reading, then, becomes that of apprehending the informing principle that binds all the parts together into a world.

If we listen to a symphony, we allow it to proceed at its own pace, not demanding that we understand it as it goes. We know that the most important element in comprehending music is the experience itself. Any analysis should come afterward, after the experience is completed. It is the same with a movie or a drama. A strongly felt impression may be thought over long after--brought into the imagination and interpreted, understood, weeks or months after the original encounter.

But if a first perception is not strong, if we have not grasped the work with sensitivity and feeling, then we are not likely to understand its full significance. So it is with literature: the reading of a literary work must be open and unskeptical; one needs what Coleridge called "the willing suspension of disbelief" in order to apprehend the significance of an art piece as a mode of knowledge.

On a first reading, then, we should read fiction as rapidly as possible, pausing only every now and then to ponder striking passages line by line. It is not advisable to stop reading and look up words or to allow the intellect to intrude by its insistence on understanding every detail. One should not attempt to master the book as one reads but rather submit to it and delay the deliberate analytic process until later.

--L. C.