

# What Ought Humanists To Do?

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## I

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At the same time, literary studies (my field) paradoxically remain extremely active. The large number of dissertations, books, essays, new journals, and conferences worldwide in the field is evidence of that. A newly advertised university position in literary studies typically has hundreds of highly qualified applicants. Most of these, alas, will remain unemployed, or employed as adjuncts typically teaching three or four composition courses a semester, often at several different colleges, for a poverty wage and often no benefits.

2) A somewhat different answer would need to be given if instead of asking, "What do humanists do?" we humanists were asked, "What did humanists use to do?" or "What should humanists do now?" The latter question is perhaps the most challenging. I have therefore called my essay "What Ought Humanists To Do?"

3) It would be seriously misleading to suggest that a literary scholar spends most of her or his time reading good poems, novels, and plays and then teaching them and writing about them. Relatively little of a literary scholar's time is spent doing the sort of work I think Denis Donoghue has in mind when he asks, "What do humanists do?" From graduate school until achieving status as a senior professor, literary scholars, like those in most academic fields, spend a great deal of time these days sending and answering email messages; serving on time-consuming departmental and university- or college-wide committees; writing seemingly innumerable letters of recommendation; serving as a departmental or program administrator; participating in reading groups; preparing and giving a multitude of conference papers at home, in the United States, and around the world; hearing and responding to papers given by colleagues or campus visitors; applying for fellowships and postdocs;

I am not saying the other work I have listed is not important. It is essential to the collective work of sustaining that complex bureaucracy we call a “college” or a “university,” or to keeping a given discipline or subdiscipline alive. I mean, however, that you cannot be sitting in a committee meeting evaluating a colleague for tenure and at the same time, as the letter from D ; requesting this essay put it, be returning yet once more to “a text . . . that inspired and continues to inspire the work [you] do,” or asking yourself, “What text would you want to see passed on to the next generation of scholars and why?”

I turn now to fulfilling my commission to choose a text and to answer the stated questions about it. I have found it impossible, however, to stick to a single text. My work has gone through several phases over the decades. (I don’t mean several theoretical orientations.) I therefore must briefly discuss two texts, not just one, with some other citations thrown in.

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Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,  
Tears from the depth of some divine despair  
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,  
In looking on the happy autumn-fields,  
And thinking of the days that are no more.

Fresh as the first beam glittering on a sail,  
That brings our friends up from the  
underworld,  
Sad as the last which reddens over one  
That sinks with all we love below the verge;  
So sad, so fresh, the days that are no more.

Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer  
dawns  
The earliest pipe of half-awaken’d birds  
To dying ears, when unto dying eyes

The casement slowly grows a glimmering  
square; *J. Hillis  
Miller*

So sad, so strange, the days that are no more.

Dear as remembered kisses after death,  
And sweet as those by hopeless fancy feign’d  
On lips that are for others; deep as love,  
Deep as first love, and wild with all regret;  
O Death in Life, the days that are no more!

— Alfred, Lord Tennyson,  
“Tears, Idle Tears” (1847)<sup>2</sup>

This is one of the songs from Tennyson’s long narrative poem, *Lancelot and the Maid*, an early poem about women’s liberation. (I have, by the way, downloaded Tennyson’s song from Wikipedia, to save the bother of typing it out and to hint at the way the Internet has transformed literary study.) In

*Lancelot and the Maid*, a group of women have withdrawn from men’s society to form a new species of *Lancelot and the Maid*, a women’s university where men are forbidden to enter. The poem is sung by one of Princess Ida’s maids, in the presence of the male narrator, who, with two friends, has invaded the Princess’s domain. They disguise themselves in drag. (I kid you not! Victorian literature contains many unexpected things.) Tennyson asserted that: “This song came to me on the yellowing autumn-tide at Tintern Abbey, full for me of its bygone memories. It is the sense of the abiding in the transient.”<sup>3</sup> You will probably not be surprised to learn that in the end, the Princess and the invading Prince marry and live happily ever after, though the Prince promises to treat his wife as an equal. So much for the limits of women’s liberation in Tennyson’s imagination!

I did not know any of this when I first encountered the poem as a freshman or sophomore at Oberlin College in 1944 or 1945. It was simply given to me, if I remem-

ber correctly, as one among many poems to read for an introductory course, without any context or background information. Or perhaps I just somehow encountered it. Serendipity plays a big role in anyone's intellectual development. I was at that point a physics major. "Tears, Idle Tears" played a crucial role in my discovery that my true vocation or calling was for literary study.<sup>4</sup> This was a major turning point in my life. I shifted from physics to English as my major in the middle of my sophomore year, in part so I could follow up the questions posed to me by this poem. I found, and still find, the poem extremely moving and beautiful. I wanted to go on having such pleasures and puzzlements as reading this poem gave me. I wanted, and still want, others to have similar pleasures and to be as puzzled as I was by the question of what the poem "really means," and why it is a good thing to read it interrogatively.

In spite of the good training in English literature I received at Oberlin and thereafter in graduate school at Harvard, I remain to this day puzzled by literary works, including this one. "Tears, Idle Tears" is a wonderful poem. I found it, however, an exceedingly strange, even scandalous, use of language. The word "strange" is, it happens, a key word in Tennyson's poem. In my science courses, I was taught to say the truth straightforwardly, to explain anomalies, and to use language in as uncomplicated a way as possible. Tennyson seemed to me to do no such things. Let me cite again just the first stanza. To do a full reading of the whole poem would take a great many pages:

Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,  
Tears from the depth of some divine despair  
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,  
In looking on the happy autumn-fields,  
And thinking of the days that are no more.

I asked myself, "What in the world does this mean?" I knew nothing of Ogden and Richards's *Meaning and Verbal Behavior*.<sup>5</sup> I did not mean anything "theoretical" by the question. I just wanted to be able to identify a straightforward rational meaning. My model was data from the stars that are read to "mean," for example, that such and such a star has a surface temperature of so and so. This assumption was based, by the way, on an incomplete understanding of the relations among hypothesis, data collection, and verification in scientific method. I took for granted, however, and still do, that Tennyson's words and figures are not just emotive blather, but that they have precise meaning that can be identified. I also took for granted, and still do, that the poem cannot be fully explained either by its function in *Poems* or by other extrinsic factors, such as Tennyson's grief over his friend Arthur Hallam's early death. Hallam is buried near Tintern Abbey, where "Tears, Idle Tears," "came to" Tennyson. What does Tennyson mean by calling his tears idle? In what sense are these tears, or any other tears, idle? Why did he write, "I know not what they mean"? I did not know what they mean either. The poem is very beautiful. There is no doubt about that, but so what? And "tears from the depth of some divine despair"? What does "divine despair" mean? It must mean despair of some god. What god? Gods are not supposed to despair. What is this god in despair about? How could tears from the depth of some divine despair get into the poet's heart anyhow, and how could those tears get from his heart to his eyes? Up the aorta and so on, by a devious route? Why are the autumn-fields paradoxically "happy"? I thought they were just inhuman matter. Why personify them in this contrary-to-fact way?

In short, I had dozens of interrelated questions about just these few lines. Ten-



No seasons pass in the Garden of Eden before the Fall. The resonances between Tennyson's poem and Hopkins's are evident, as well as the differences. Tennyson, for example, says nothing so overtly about original sin as Hopkins does:

Sorrows springs are the same.  
Nor mouth had, nor mind, expressed  
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:  
It is the blight man was born for,  
It is Margaret you mourn for.<sup>10</sup>

Like the leaves in autumn, Margaret too will die, as will the speaker of "Tears, Idle Tears." The conflicted internal state of the latter is projected spontaneously as an oxymoronic personification into the "5dm(e)75ected sponta.9.067984w[(oriumn, M-½eld The conts, Ie

Vanished, and left but memories, that  
 should be out of season  
 With the hot blood of youth, of love crossed  
 long ago;  
 And I took all the blame out of all sense and  
 reason,  
 Until I cried and trembled and rocked to  
 and fro,  
 Riddled with light. Ah! when the ghost  
 begins to quicken,  
 Confusion of the death-bed over, is it sent  
 Out naked on the roads, as the books say,  
 and stricken  
 By the injustice of the skies for punishment?

– W. B. Yeats, “The Cold Heaven” (1916)<sup>11</sup>

More and more, as the years have gone by, and though my vocation for literary study has remained steadfast, I have found myself, in rapidly changing university conditions, including the increasing globalization of literary study (study of so-called World Literature), being invited to conferences all over the world where I am asked to give lectures defending literary study.<sup>12</sup> One example is the International Conference on Literature Reading and Research that I attended in Guangzhou (once called Canton), China, in September 2010, held at the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. (Guangdong is the name of the province.) I chose in my lecture to take Yeats’s “The Cold Heaven” as a paradigmatic example of the difficulties of deciding whether or not we should read or teach literature now. The poem also exemplifies the difficulties of explaining such a text to students at home and globally. The poem comes from Yeats’s volume of 1916, *The Waste Land*.

I greatly admire this poem. It moves me immensely. It moves me so much that I want not only to read it but also to teach it and talk about it to anyone who will listen. I wish I could read it out loud now to

all my readers, with special stresses on “Suddenly” at the beginning and on the extraordinary long drawn-out “Ah!” that is the turning point of the poem. Poetry, after all, is an oral art, or should still be.

Well, should I read or teach this poem now, or not? I answer initially that there is no obligation or responsibility. I can read or teach it if I like, but that decision cannot easily be justified by anything beyond the call the poem itself makes on me to read it and to teach it. Least of all do I think I can tell students, colleagues, or administrators with a straight face that reading the poem or hearing me teach it is going to help them find a job, or help them mitigate climate change. Reading the poem with care might possibly, however, help students resist the lies told by the media, as I shall argue for literature in general below.

Reading “The Cold Heaven” or teaching it is, first and foremost, a good in itself, an end in itself, as Kant said all art is. The mystical poet Angelus Silesius (1624–1677) affirmed, in *Clouds of Darkness*, that “The rose is without why; it blooms because it blooms.”<sup>13</sup> Like that rose, “The Cold Heaven” is without why. The poem, like a rose, has no reason for being beyond itself. You can read it or not read it, as you like. It is its own end. Young people these days who watch films or television shows, or play video games, or listen to popular music do not, for the most part, attempt to justify what they do. They do it because I shall

ever, is something I should not try to justify primarily by its practical or social utility.

A natural response when I see a ½ I like or hear a concert that moves me is to want to tell other people about it, as my correspondent in Bergen wanted to tell everybody about those Stevie Wonder concerts. These tellings most often take the form, “Wow! I saw a wonderful movie last night. Let me tell you about it.” I suggest that my desire to teach Yeats’s “The Cold Heaven” takes much the same form: “Wow! I have just read a wonderful poem by Yeats. Let me read it to you and tell you about it.” That telling, naturally enough, takes the form of wanting to pass on what I think other readers might ½nd helpful to lead them to respond to the poem as enthusiastically as I do.

I list, in an order following that of the poem, some of the things that might need to be explained not only, for example, to a young Chinese reader, but also, no doubt, to a video-game-playing Western young person ignorant of European poetry. Literary scholar David Damrosch, in his book on world literature, presupposes with equanimity, as do I, that when a given piece of literature circulates into a different culture from that of its origin, it will be read differently.<sup>14</sup> I am not talking here, however, about a high-level culturally embedded reading, but just about making sense of Yeats’s poem. This need to make sense might arise, for example, in trying to decide how to translate this or that phrase into Chinese or some other non-English language.

Here are some things, in the form of truncated notations, that it might be good to know when trying to understand “The Cold Heaven”:

1) Something about Yeats’s life and works.

2) An explanation of the verse form used: three iambic hexameter quatrains rhyming abab. Is it an odd sort of sonnet

in hexameters rather than pentameters, and missing the last couplet? How does this form contribute to the poem’s force and meaning?

3) Knowledge of the recurrent use of “sudden” or “suddenly” in Yeats’s lyrics, as in the opening of “Leda and the Swan”–



9) Account of the difference between “sense” and “reason” in “I took the blame out of all sense and reason,” or is this just tautological? Yeats scholar A. Norman Jeffares cites T. R. Henn’s explanation that “‘out of all sense’ is an Irish (and ambiguous) expression meaning both ‘to an extent far beyond what common sense could justify’ and ‘beyond the reach of sensation.’”<sup>15</sup>

10) Explanation of the double meaning of the verb “riddle” in the marvelous phrase, “riddled with light”: “riddle” meaning punctured with holes, and “riddle” as having a perhaps unanswered riddle or conundrum posed to one. Being riddled with light is paradoxical because light is supposed to be illuminating, not obscuring.

11) Unsnarling of the lines centering on “quicken” in “when the ghost [meaning disembodied soul] begins to quicken, / Confusion of the death bed over.” “Quickening” usually refers to the coming to life of the fertilized egg in the womb. An erotic love-bed scene is superimposed on the death-bed one.

12) “As the books say”: which books? Those books in esoteric philosophy and folklore that Yeats read.

13) Relate “injustice of the skies for punishment” to the usual assumption that heaven only punishes justly, gives us our just deserts after death. Why and how can the skies be unjust? By blaming him for something that was not his fault? Connect this to Greek and later tragedy. It is not Oedipus’s fault that he has killed his father and fathered children with his mother, or is it? After all, he did commit parricide and incest, even though unintentionally.

14) Why is the last sentence a question? Is it a real question or a merely rhetorical one? Would the answer and its place if the blank that follows the twelve lines of this defective sonnet were filled? The poem seems both too much in line lengths and too little in number of lines.

15) Finally, Chinese readers, as well as Western ones, might like to know, or might even observe on their own, that Yeats, like other European poets of his generation, was influenced in this poem and elsewhere by what he knew, or thought he knew, through translations, of Chinese poetry and Chinese ways of thinking. The volume 道 家 詩 集, which contains “The Cold Heaven,” has an epigraph from someone Yeats calls, somewhat pretentiously, “Khoun-fou-Tseu,” presumably Confucius: “How am I fallen from myself, for a long time now / I have not seen the Prince of Chang in my dreams” ( , 269). Chinese readers and readers generally might have a lot to say about this Chinese connection and about how it makes “The Cold Heaven” a work of world literature.

All this information would be given to my hearers or readers, however, not to “expand their minds,” but in the hope that it might help them admire the poem as much as I do and be moved by it as much as I am. Being moved in the right way, I argue, depends on understanding, or should do so. The affect is a performative effect of comprehending the words rightly. Yeats’s poem can hardly be described as “uplifting,” since its thematic climax is a claim that the skies are unjust and punish people for things of which they are not guilty. That is a terrifying wisdom. Telling others about this poem is not something I do but something I cannot help doing, something the poem urgently calls on me to do.

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of becoming trade schools, preparation for getting a job. Such institutions have less and less place for the humanities in the old sense of their essential role in a liberal arts education.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps even more threatening to old-fashioned literary studies, however, has been the amazingly rapid development of new teletechnologies that are fast making printed book literature obsolete, a thing of the past. Even many of those who could teach literature, who were hired to do so, choose rather, for good reasons, to teach other topics instead: the history of Western imperialism, or film, or video games, or some one among the multitude of race, gender, or performance studies, or another of those myriad and still-proliferating other interests that have replaced or subordinated literature for many humanists. More and more courses are being offered not in a classroom, but as MOOCs, massive open online courses, circulating on the Internet. A large proportion of these are in math, science, and economics, but some are in the humanities.<sup>17</sup> Millions of students already use them. MOOCs are on the face of it problematic and controversial, but I doubt if that will stop their proliferation, nor their rapid transformation of higher education. If a new telecommunication technology exists, its widespread use seems for some reason irresistible. Who would have thought that iPhones, Google, Facebook, and Twitter would so quickly become indispensable to so many millions worldwide?

Our present-day humanists can hardly be blamed for wanting to teach what interests them, what has shaped their lives and those of their students. Though an immense number of books, essays, and courses about print literature are still being produced or taught each year, enrollment in courses on such old-fashioned topics as “The Victorian Novel” is considerably down in most colleges and universities.

New monographs about print literature, however sophisticated they may be about narrative theory and literary history, typically sell only a few hundred copies at most, whereas a successful video game sells millions of copies and does really have a big cultural effect on a lot of people, for better or worse. If Shakespeare were to return today, he would most likely not write plays but film or television scripts or, perhaps, employ the latest technology and “write” video games.

The new digital devices—computers, iPhones, iPads, Facebook, Twitter, video games, and the like—are rapidly diminishing the role literature plays in many people’s lives. A lot of people these days play video games or watch films on Netflix or surf the net instead of reading printed literature. That is a big loss, but it is not the end of civilization, any more than was the shift from manuscript culture to print culture.

Now the good news: The reading, study, and teaching of literature is surviving more strongly than one might expect even in the midst of an exceedingly rapid and no doubt irreversible global change from one dominant medium (print) to another (digital). A lot of people continue to read literature, but in digital form—on Kindles and the like. I walked down an airplane aisle not long ago and spotted ten people reading what looked like novels, but eight of them were doing that on an e-reader. At least they were reading literature, not playing video games. An amazing number of literary works (in the old-fashioned sense of printed novels, poems, and plays) are now available online either for free or for a few dollars. These digital versions are usually searchable, which is a great help in certain kinds of literary study. It is no longer necessary to be near a big university library to have access to a vast array of literary works. That is a strong force for democracy. I was able not long

ago to see for the 1st time, in its Kindle  
version, the 1st edition of Trollope's

ally goes on in the classroom and in the minds and feelings of students when they read literature.

My final example is a forthcoming special issue of the journal *Style*, edited by Ranjan Ghosh of the University of North Bengal.<sup>20</sup> Under the title “Does Literature Matter?” the issue gathers essays on this topic by a wide range of scholars.

I cite these three titles to indicate that those who love literature and want to teach it are turning thoughtfully to its defense in the context of the global shift to digital media and on the basis of their actual teaching experience.

I end now by naming several uses reading literature and teaching it can have even in our radically new social, cultural, and technological situation.

No doubt the real world is transformed by being turned into literature, but I see no reason to deny that we learn a lot about that real world now and in the past by reading literature. Two examples among almost innumerable ones are: 1) we can learn about Victorian class structure and courtship/marriage conventions by reading Anthony Trollope’s novels; and 2) we can learn a lot about the nineteenth-century city of London by reading Dickens’s novels. Such learning is of great value.

In addition, we can learn from literary works the way what might be called “ideological mistakes” often come to be made, namely by taking figurative language literally. “We all of us, grave or light, get our thoughts entangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them,” says George Eliot’s narrator in *Middlemarch*.<sup>21</sup> The novel gives a striking example of this in the way the intelligent and sensitive





would public literary criticism look like?" (120). I would hardly dare to claim that this present *J. Hillis*  
essay is an example of "public literary criticism," but it is an attempt to write as plainly as I *Miller*  
can about two actual examples of literature. Another essay in that same issue of *Dædalus*, lit-

- <sup>17</sup> For two recent discussions of MOOCs, see Ramin Rahimian, “Virtual U.,” *The New York Times*, January 6, 2013; and Nathan Heller, “Laptop U: Has the Future of College Moved Online?” *The New Yorker*, May 20, 2013, 80–91.
- <sup>18</sup> Cristina Vischer Bruns, *Why Literature? The Value of Literary Reading and What It Means for Teaching* (New York: Continuum, 2011).
- <sup>19</sup> Mark Edmundson, *Why Read?* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004); and Mark Edmundson, *Why Teach? In Defense of a Real Education* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).
- <sup>20</sup> Special issue of *SubStance*, “Does Literature Matter?” ed. Ranjan Ghosh, 42 (2) (2013).
- <sup>21</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Rosemary Ashton (London: Penguin, 1994), 85.
- <sup>22</sup> Paul de Man, “The Resistance to Theory,” in *The Resistance to Theory*, 11.
- <sup>23</sup> Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973); *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, with a note by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975). Though I have great respect for Barthes’s influential book, I cannot follow him in the sharp distinction he makes between literary texts that give pleasure by reaffirming ideological presuppositions we already have (Proust) and those that give the *jouissance* of something that upsets those presuppositions (Robbe-Grillet). Proust’s ways with language, like Dickens’s and Trollope’s, for example, give me ideology-challenging *jouissance* even more than does Robbe-Grillet, who seems a little old hat and artificial these days, in spite of his striking narrative innovations.