

17 | Why Literature?

Who reads

Incessantly, and to his reading brings not
A spirit and judgment equal or superior,
(And what he brings what need he elsewhere seek?)
Uncertain and unsettled still remains,
Deep versed in books and shallow in himself,
Crude or intoxicate, collecting toys
And trifles for choice matters . . .
As children gathering pebbles already on the shore.

---John Milton, Paradise Regained (IV, l)

Are we having fun yet?

--Bill Griffith, Zippy Stories, cover

A few years ago, I was able to see the prehistoric paintings 10,000 or 30,000 years old in the caves in the Dordogne region of southern France. Some say these skillful works of art are the earliest unequivocal evidence of truly modern humans, humans like ourselves. To see them, I stooped over and scraped and clambered through a labyrinth of chambers and doorways and flattened paths worn by archaeologists and other tourists. Finally in the dim light I could see these charcoal-outlined,

ocher-shaded deer and bison and aurochs. Almost all the cave paintings depicted the animals those Stone Age humans hunted so long ago, some of them, like the aurochs, as long gone as the hunters themselves.

Inevitably, I wondered about those ancient artists in their animal hides and thongs. They dug the outlines of the animals into the stone by scraping sharpened rocks along the lines over and over and over. They used pigments laboriously prepared from crushed and dissolved minerals. They used sticks, apparently, to press those pigments into the walls they had reached with such difficulty deep inside the mountain. Why take all that trouble? Perhaps the paintings mattered so much because of the compulsion that goes with creativity. I felt a strange sense of the primordial humanity we share with those ancient people, but one aspect I marveled at more than all the others.

Most of the paintings are half a kilometer or more into the caves, six or more city blocks to this New Yorker. Far less limber than my Cro-Magnon forebears, I felt cramped and contorted as I bent over, sometimes crawling on hands and knees, through a quarter-mile of rocky openings and passages. I found it hard to make my way into the parts of the caves where the paintings were. Even with a powerful modern flashlight, I would have found it impossible to get to the painted wall without a guide. How could I have known where to look in that stony maze?

Before we entered the caves, the guides carefully equipped us with elaborate electric torches, and they made very sure the big batteries were fully recharged and tested. What would have happened if our batteries had all died? How would we tourists have found our way out? How, then, did those Stone Age painters manage to find their way deep into the mountain by the flickering light of a wick in an oil lamp? And if that light blew out? They would have died of thirst before they could find their way to water. Why did they do it?

Whatever impelled these artists to create the paintings, and their tribespeople to crawl in and stare at them, they were all risking their lives. The archaeologists told us the paintings probably served some religious purpose, a placating of the animal-gods, perhaps for killing their totem animals.

At any rate, our ancestors must have thought their very survival depended on those works of art. Does ours? Some have said so.

Why do we do literature? Why do we do art? And why do all cultures do them? Before we can address those questions, we need to settle something.

What is literature?

Before we can talk about why we human beings create and (especially) re-create literature, we probably ought to at least ask what it is. I have touched on that hard question before.

As we saw in ch. 4, theorist Northrop Frye answered it this way: "The question of whether a thing `is' a work of art or not is one which cannot be settled by appealing to something in the nature of the thing itself . . . if it now exists for our pleasure it is what we call art."¹ Nothing "in" the thing itself marks art off from non-art. It is our agreement to treat the thing as literature that makes it literature. Today we read Tibetan or Pharaonic religious texts as poetry. We read eighteenth-century newsletters for their prose style. Greek vases that served the practical need to mix wine with water, we regard now as works of art.

What makes literature literature and art art, then, is not some property of these objects but a convention. The central fact about literature and the arts is the convention that we will not act in response to them, Kant's "disinterestedness." When we observe, for example, that the lines of a certain text, only go partway across the page, we call it poetry, and we agree to regard it unrelated to immediate actions on the world. We take an "aesthetic stance."

That convention not to act embodies a deeply different state of mind from our ancestors' making a perilous journey into the labyrinthine cave to view pictures of aurochs. Perhaps they thought they had to placate their gods and their animals or else starvation would follow. For them, viewing their art was in itself a kind of action. It is hard for me, sitting in my easy chair, to imagine that anything much depends upon my reading a Hemingway hunting or fishing story. I am just enjoying myself.

The phrase, "just enjoying myself," suggests that we have a perfectly good explanation of why all cultures do literature. Frye said it. We get pleasure from literary works.

¹ Frye (1971 [1957]), 345.

Are we having fun yet?

People do literature because they enjoy it. Isn't that enough? Steven Pinker (at one time, anyway) cheerfully accepted this position (in the book Pinker published in 1999 before he converted to an unconditional faith in evolutionary explanations). The arts, he wrote, are "biologically frivolous."² The arts, he pointed out, draw on two abilities of our minds, each in itself quite adaptive. First, we measure the biological fitness of what we are doing by the sensation of pleasure. Second, we use a knowledge of cause and effect to achieve that biological fitness. Then, "Put them together and you get a mind that rises to a biologically pointless challenge: figuring out how to get at the pleasure circuits of the brain and deliver little jolts of enjoyment without the inconvenience of wringing bona fide fitness increments from the harsh world."³ The arts have no use, almost by definition, and therefore they give us no evolutionary advantage. They offer nothing but pleasure, and hence cannot affect survival and the gene pool. The most you can say about the arts is that they enhance some people's status--according to Pinker in 1999.

He went on to compare our pleasure at the arts (especially lowbrow ones) to taking recreational drugs or eating a strawberry shortcake. We humans concoct certain stimuli for the purpose of pushing our pleasure buttons. These are the self-stimulation systems I pointed to in connection with our enjoying literature and in making sense of a literary work (chs. 12 and 11).

Curiously, Pinker's remarks match Freud's:

the artist makes it possible for other people once more to derive consolation and alleviation from their own sources of pleasure in their unconscious which have become inaccessible to them; he earns their gratitude and admiration and he has thus achieved through his phantasy what originally he had achieved only in his phantasy--honour, power and the love of women.⁴

Over and over again (devoting an entire essay, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," to the idea), Freud wrote that art and literature are like a child's play, a glorified daydream, a mild narcotic, or an illusion offering an escape from reality into fantasy.⁵ In this book, I have maintained the same thing

² Pinker 1999, 521.

³ Pinker 1999, 524.

⁴ Freud 1916-1917 [1915-1917], 16: 376-377.

⁵ Freud 1908e; 1930 [1929], 79-81; 1920g, 17.

again and again. We approach literature and art without purpose, not planning to act as part of the experience. Like Zippy, we just want to have fun.

Pinker, Freud, and I thus leave us with a conclusion that is at least mildly distressing to those of us who love stories and poems and plays and think they are more than just fun. Are the three of us right? Is literature simply useless, frivolous, or flattering? That's hardly a satisfying conclusion to someone like me who has spent his life doing literature in one way or another.

To be sure, as a teacher of literature, I've often felt that the books my students read were simply one more experience that they were having in college. They are meeting a great variety of people, being exposed to new ideas, doing sports, falling in love, falling out of love, getting "wasted," and a host of other things that I probably don't want to hear about. And they are also reading Shakespeare. Literature is one more experience--that is its value to a growing mind. It is a very special one, to be sure, but just one experience among many experiences.

Genetic pleasures?

One could argue that we are programmed by our genes to take pleasure in imaginings like literature. (This is surely the last gasp of evolutionary explanation.) That is, the mechanism by which all cultures do literature would be this: literature confers an evolutionary advantage. Because it does we develop genes that make literature pleasurable. (I hope I am stating this fairly.) The genes make it pleasurable so that we will do it and so gain the evolutionary advantage.

Jerry Fodor, however, shows that this kind of explanation adds nothing. It is circular or even tautological, when Fodor states it his way. How do we know our genes program us to do literature? Because all cultures in all times enjoy literature. And why do all cultures enjoy literature? Because our genes program us to enjoy literature.⁶ The genetic step in the argument doesn't add a thing.

Patrick Hogan states the bases for literary pleasure more accurately by distinguishing the function (enjoying literature) from the particular brain mechanisms which that enjoyment uses. He is one of

⁶ Fodor 1997.

the rare literary critics who can base an argument from universals on an extraordinarily wide knowledge of non-Western literatures.

Hogan points to story universals, but he defines these not as 100% universal, but as motifs that occur across genetically and geographically unrelated literatures more often than would be predicted by chance alone.⁷ He argues step by step:

- 1) we have universal patterns in human emotions (well-established in the neurological literature and very likely inherited).
- 2) literature plays into these universal patterns and takes advantage of them (as in ch. 6 of this book).
- 3) the universals of narrative literature, the recurring motifs, package these patterns in such a way as to give us pleasure.
- 4) pleasure is enough of a motive; we need not conclude that we humans inherit a propensity for literature.
- 5) we need only conclude
 - a) that we inherit certain emotional patterns and brain systems for pleasure, and
 - b) that we use literature to put these systems through their enjoyable paces.

If so, our pleasure in literature needs no special explanation, because it mimics our pleasures in life. We need not invoke any special genetic inheritance other than the general principle that mammals have a limbic system that enables them to guide their behavior by the expectation of rewards (instead of by the many fixed genetic programs that reptiles and birds have).

As mammals, we are programed by dopamine signals to seek things that offer a potential reward. Carrying out that genetic inheritance, doing things we expect to enjoy, does not change the genes themselves. If we do literature because we enjoy it, we need no further explanation for its universality, any more than we need evolutionary explanations for smelling flowers, enjoying a warm soak, or, to use one of Pinker's favorite examples, eating strawberry shortcake.

We need not, then, proclaim some high purpose for literature in the total scheme of human endeavor. We just want to have fun. We don't have to argue that it contributes to our evolutionary

⁷ Hogan 2003a, 19; 2003b, 133-135. Hogan's neuroscientific approach seems to me truer to human nature than the story grammars such as those of Propp 1984 or Lakoff 1972. It is much more sophisticated than the "monomyth" approach of, say, Joseph Campbell (1949), the "Cambridge anthropologists," or Jungian discoverers of archetypes.

success or that it makes us wiser and better people. We do literature simply because we enjoy it. We get pleasure from seeing a movie or reading a good novel or hearing an edgy poem. We have already seen in the many preceding pages how we do that.

We mammals all have the same circuitry tell us to do things that give us pleasure. We have called it (following Jaak Panksepp) the SEEKING system. Wordsworth called it, "the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which [man] knows, and feels, and lives, and moves."⁸ Parts of a dopaminergic system light up in brain imaging when subjects are shown a picture of a romantically beloved person, given chocolate, or offered a chance of revenge, all activities that give pleasure.⁹ What we have seen is that literature is just one more self-stimulation system that we use to give us pleasure, nothing special.

Is that right? Is there no difference between literature and Pinker's strawberry shortcake? Is that in fact what this long excursion into brain science has shown?

What this book was all about

At the outset, I said that I would look at well-known ideas about the way we create and re-create literature in the light of established discoveries in neuroscience. We have indeed been progressing, chapter by chapter, through various traditional questions about literature: Why do we separate the text from ourselves? Why don't we doubt the unrealities of fiction? Do texts make meaning? Or do readers make meaning and, if so, how? Are literary characters people? And many another.

At this point, you have seen, I hope, that we enjoy literature by putting our brains through a complex process. We come to a work of literature with two expectations. One, we will not have to act on it. Two, we expect to take pleasure in the literary work. The form of literature helps us ward off possible unpleasures, and our processing the content enables us to project wish-fulfilling fantasies into it. Finally, to enjoy a literary work, we need to make some kind of sense out of it. All of this gives us a sense of mastery. We take pleasure in experiencing a world that makes as much and maybe more sense than the real one.

⁸ William Wordsworth, "Observations Prefixed to `Lyrical Ballads,'" 1800.

⁹ de Quervain et al. 2004. Small et al. 2001. Fisher et al. 2002.

Oddly, though, we take pleasure in a world whose gratifications are only imaginary. And we achieve all this by using systems in our brains differently than we use those same systems to gain pleasure in daily life.

When we looked at the making and enjoying of literature from a neuropsychological (or, really, neuropsychanalytic) point of view, we found a number of interwoven changes from our ordinary brain functioning in the unusual way we use our brains to create or re-create literature.

1. In the most important change, we attenuate or perhaps shut down entirely our systems for acting and planning actions. This, we have seen, is a cardinal principle in people's thinking about literature from earliest times, Kant's "disinterestedness" again (chs. 4 and 5).
2. When we turn to literature, we expect to gain pleasure without doing anything to gain it. (ch. 8). Hence we can shut off our action systems all the more easily.
3. Because we shut down our action systems, we can become "absorbed" in literature. In that special trance-like state of mind, we become unaware of our bodies and our environment (ch. 4).
4. When we shut down our action systems and are "absorbed" in literature, we cease to monitor reality. We do not doubt the most fantastic things that science-fiction or fairy tales or superhero movies can produce. In Coleridge's phrase, we suspend disbelief (ch. 5).
5. When we shut down our action systems and are "absorbed" in literature, we make the "where" information from our sensory systems independent of the "what" information we derive from the language of a literary work. With a poem or story, we can relate to purely imaginary characters (with no "where") as if they were real. Conversely, watching stage or screen dramas whose characters have a "where," if we are "absorbed," we ignore the "what" fact that the characters are just actors pretending (ch. 7).
6. We humans feel emotions whether we will or no. If we are presented with a situation that would, in normal primate experience, cause fear or anger or disgust or jealousy or desire, we will feel those emotions. In life, emotions include impulses to act. (Who ever was

enraged at someone without wanting to hit the person?) But with literature, we have turned off our action systems. We therefore feel the emotions psychologically but the impulse to act is inhibited. This is another reason we can feel real fear or disgust or anger or affection toward literary persons and situations even though (or because!) we know perfectly well they are not "real" (ch. 6).

7. When we experience a literary work fully, merging with it, its form (particularly the omissions) perform some of the functions our own inner defenses would normally carry out (ch. 9).
8. When we experience a literary work fully, merging with it, we have turned off reality-testing and we are not planning for actions in the real world. We therefore take the brakes off ("disinhibit") our goal-seeking systems. We can therefore project our fantasies wishfully and freely into the literary work.
9. Again, because we have turned down or off reality-constraints on language processing, the right hemisphere does more than it usually does. Spreading activations in the right hemisphere make us more open to puns, jokes, metaphors, ambiguities, and sound-associations, in other words, to literary language, than the left-hemisphere language centers normally permit (ch. 10).
10. We bring to the literary experience feelings and memories from our own lives which are disproportionate to the unreal literary events themselves (chs. 5, 6, 10, 14). Coleridge said it precisely right when he said, we "transfer from our inward nature a human interest." We can therefore feel toward literary events as though they were "bigger than life."
11. Because we have disinhibited, freed, our wishing systems, we can, as if we were confabulating, attribute personally styled meanings to literary works. We "make sense" of them, fitting them into our regular mental processing of experience (ch. 11). We make them into sublimations of fantasies we have wishfully and freely projected into the work.

12. If we succeed in this process, we enjoy literature because we have mimicked the kind of successful achievement of goal-seeking that we do in everyday life. We feel the pleasure we would feel if we had succeeded in some wish-fulfilling plan or action. And we don't have to face the obstacles and limits associated with trying to change the real world. On the other hand, the satisfaction is only mental (ch. 12).

Looking over all these changes in the brain when we do literature, I see one overarching principle. When we are experiencing literature, we turn on and turn off brain systems in ways that we do not in ordinary life. In real life, we do not separate the "what" from the "where," we do not shut down reality testing, we do not inhibit planning for action, and we do not give free rein to our wish-fulfilling fantasies, except when we are daydreaming. We do not treat imaginings like experiences or mental satisfactions like physical ones. None of the brain situations numbered above corresponds to something we do when we are simply taking a walk, going to the beach, shopping at the mall, meeting lovers, or any of our other daily doings.

To be sure, some aspects of "doing" literature simply carry out the things we do in ordinary life.

Thus,

13. All humans live out a pattern of being in which we fulfill and vary an identity theme derived from childhood. Writers write and readers read with a style that expresses that identity theme (ch. 13).
14. Writers have a compulsion to write because a particular artistic medium or sensory modality became part of that identity theme. When this acting-out succeeds, it fulfills identity and is therefore a source of great pleasure. When it fails, it is a source of equally great unpleasure because identity re-creation has failed. Hence the creative urge acquires its compulsive quality (ch. 13).
15. In life, we necessarily make the assumption, based on a childhood "naive psychology" that others' minds or brains will work as our own would in similar circumstances. In judging literature, then, we make the same assumption. We automatically think that what pleases us will please others too--will "please many and please long" (ch. 14). Hence we announce that such-and-such a work is "good" or "great."

In short, we carry out with literary works the same patterns of re-identity creation that we do in life. Mostly, though, literature is some kind of game that we play with our brains. Psychoanalysts

have long thought of literature as play or (following Ernst Kris' idea) as a "regression in the service of the ego."¹⁰ Today we know what Kris could not have known about the brain. Today we can say that, when we experience literature, we alter our brain systems. Call it regression if you like--the state of our brain doing literature differs in distinct ways from the way our brain functions when we do ordinary living. We evolved the ability to turn brain systems on and off in ways that even our primate cousins cannot. And that ability, though not specifically literary in itself, enables us to create and enjoy literature.

That is what I hope this book has accomplished: saying how systems in our brains function when we are creating or enjoying literature. I realize that this is only a start, that advances in brain science over the next decades will make it possible to say much more. And I also realize that there is one big thing this book did not--and perhaps could not--do.

What this book did not do

I've not tried to relate individual literary works to the brain. I did call attention to the pleasantly simple experiment of Uri Hasson and his colleagues. Scanning the brains of five people viewing a "spaghetti western," they found that, at the level of perception and attention, the brains performed pretty much alike. But at the level of theme and meaning, they all performed differently.¹¹ I would expect that to hold true generally. As we saw in chs. 8-12, we come to literary works with widely shared expectations, but we experience them through individual defenses and projections of content, individual ways of "making sense," and individual reasons for enjoying a given work.

Each of us uses codes, canons, and physiology to create or experience literature through our individual style of being, our identity. Not until we can get at individuality through MRI, PET scans, optical imaging, or technologies yet unknown, do I see brain science having much to say about the individual experience of individual literary works. I can not imagine scans of individuality happening in the present state of the science or, indeed, in the foreseeable future. I have not tried, therefore, to use neuropsychology to deal with individual literary works.

¹⁰ Kris 1952, 177 and passim.

¹¹ Hasson et al. 2004.

The theorists who favor evolutionary explanations, however, have been quick to jump in with answers about individual works. For example, two enthusiasts announce as their premise, "From the squishy life-stuff of humanity, nothing nonbiological was ever fashioned." I take it the authors intend by their tautology that all human phenomena, including the psychological, are really biological. Indeed, they go on to say that great literature simply represents an unchanging human nature, genetically rooted: "Characters are believable insofar as they behave in concert with biological expectation." That is why we believe in "such obviously human traits as Romeo and Juliet's hormonally overheated teenage love, Hamlet's intellectualized indecisiveness, Lady Macbeth's ambition as well as her remorse, Falstaff's drunken cavorting, Viola's resourcefulness, Lear's impotent rage, Othello's jealousy, and Puck's well, Puckishness." But wouldn't a simpler explanation be that we believe them simply because we see them around us all the time?

The authors go on to explain the Aeneid as reflecting "our shared human biology." Aeneas does not abandon the seductive widow, Queen Dido, to go off and found Rome because Jupiter tells him to. Rather, "Aeneas was following human--that is, biological--impulses, conveniently projected onto the gods." "When the alternative is maximizing your inclusive fitness by founding a dynasty, a sterile dalliance with a middle-aged woman is maladaptive."¹²

As we saw earlier in this chapter, Jerry Fodor shows that this kind of evolutionary explanation adds nothing. Why does Aeneas leave Dido to found Rome? Because his genes tell him to. Why do his genes tell him to? So that he will leave Dido and found Rome.

Moreover, that kind of explanation seems to me to flatten a rich and complex work. The Aeneid? It just acts out our genetic program. Yet, reading the Aeneid, I sense myself in the presence of great human themes: the glory and brutality of patriotism; our will as opposed to forces beyond us; the splendor and hardness of destiny; the necessary conflicts in what we desire, here, romantic love and valor in the world. Those are what I feel; you may feel others.

¹² Barash and Barash 2002.

Biological explanations appeal to the universals of human nature, but what we have seen as crucial to experiencing literature and hard to get at are the individualistic features. As we saw in ch. 13, we experience literary works through a hierarchy of processes. The low-level physical processes will be pretty much the same for all of us (as the experiment with the Clint Eastwood movie showed). Some high-level cultural processes will be shared by everybody. Others will be applied only by certain "interpretive communities." Finally, there will be an individual identity driving and shaping all these processes.

Aut prodesse aut delectare

In this book, I have tried to explain how we get pleasure from literature, just as we get pleasure from all our SEEKINGS (at least when they succeed). Yet we draw distinctions. There are different kinds of pleasures: Pinker's strawberry shortcake, Louis Armstrong, Zippy comics, Milton's poetry, orgasm--all have presumably first energized that dopaminergic, reward seeking system in our brains and then found consummation. But we also know that they are different, and we rate them differently.

We draw distinctions even within the single category of literature. No one would claim that the pleasure we get from the current best-selling romance novel or mystery story or soap opera ranks with Hamlet. No one would claim that tonight's sitcom on television, no matter how hilarious we find it, ranks with Mel Brooks' The Producers or that the cop show, exciting as it is, deserves comparison with Crime and Punishment.

We make value judgments, distinguishing our pleasures both as to kind and what, for lack of a better word, I would call "degree." We translate that degree into judgments of value. We speak of "higher" and "lower" pleasures. And we distinguish "high" literature from "low," "great" from "mediocre." And we find some agreement among ourselves when we do (as in ch. 14).

How can we understand, then, what we are feeling when we distinguish literary pleasure from other kinds and a "high" literary pleasure from a "low" one? And how does mere pleasure give a purpose to literature?

Most, perhaps even all, theories of literature seem to me to agree in a general way on two purposes. They are most simply expressed by Horace in his *De Arte Poetica*: aut prodesse aut delectare. delectare: to delight--that's straightforward enough. We turn to literature for a pleasurable experience. We usually translate Horace's other term, prodesse (literally, to be + onward) as "to instruct" or "to teach" or "to enlighten." That seems a little bit more puzzling. Here are various translations: "to be beneficial or to delight"; "delighting and instructing"; "A poet should instruct, or please, or both." Note that Horace, Pinker, and just about anyone who has written on the subject seems to feel that literature needs some kind of moral justification. Pleasure is not enough to justify fantasizing.

Horace found it in prodesse. In the duller periods of our cultural history, people said that prodesse meant teaching better morals. That, I take it, would be the point of view of, say, fundamentalist politicians who advocate things like McGuffey's *Reader*. Not a very sophisticated view and not very pleasurable literature.

Another idea of prodesse would be that of a middlebrow book reviewer. "This novel tells us what life is like in an advertising agency." "This is a sensitive and perceptive account of a girl's growing up on a Minnesota farm in 1903." Prodesse, enlightenment, means giving you information about other human beings. But I, at least, do not prize *Ulysses* for its picture of 1905 Dublin nor *The Great Gatsby* for telling me about Long Island in the 1920s. The statement that the *Aeneid* acts out biological impulses seems to me that kind of informational reading.

Where Horace went wrong

If we take a less fundamentalist view, and a less literal view, I would suggest that the problem lies in Horace's distinguishing, aut prodesse aut delectare, to enlighten or delight. The delight is the enlightenment. The delectare in Horace's formula is the experience of entering an imaginative world created by a writer. I can enjoy the daring and manliness of Hemingway's hunters and soldiers. I can enjoy the intensely interpersonal mind of *Mrs. Dalloway*. I can enjoy the gallantry of Sir Walter Scott's romances or the avarice of Balzac's world or Dickens's. In other words, I can take vicarious

pleasure in experiences, both good and bad, that I have not had myself, precisely because I do not have to act on them. I will not pass judgments. I will not look for information from them. I want simply to merge into these worlds.

In responding that way, this book has shown, our brains function in ways different from ordinary life. We resort to meanings of words that would ordinarily be inappropriate or we turn off our systems for testing reality or we separate "what" from "where." We let our emotions run without their usual correctives from the inhibiting parts of the brain. We connect and disconnect systems in ways that we do not in order to live. Literary pleasure differs sharply from the pleasures we gain in everyday life from ordinary self-stimulation systems. Literary pleasure would seem to have no evolutionary purpose at all, because we accept purely imagined satisfactions in lieu of the real, physical satisfactions we need for survival.

As Milton alleges in the epigraph to this chapter, mere reading by itself serves no better purpose than collecting pretty pebbles. Reading gives us pleasure. So do pretty pebbles. But to gain more, to gain wisdom perhaps, one needs to bring to reading all the spirit and judgment one already has. And what you do not have, literature by itself will not give you. "What he brings what need he elsewhere seek?" In effect, Milton is saying, literature by itself does not enlighten (prodesse). Is he right?

I think not. Pleasure is enlightenment--provided we understand the nature of that pleasure in our brains.

Delectare can be prodesse

First, as we have seen, throughout this book, in fully experiencing literature, we turn on and turn off brain systems in ways that we do not in ordinary life. We inhibit action, stop testing reality, divorce "what" from "where," and all the rest. Second, because of this unlikelike brain activity, when we fully experience literature, we use what, for lack of a better word, I would call an enlarged functioning of the brain, different from our functioning with everyday self-stimulation systems.

In chs. 8-12, I somewhat artificially separated our response to literature into: expectation, form, content, and meaning. The combination, if successful, leads to satisfaction. In the literary situation,

much more so than in daily life, our expectations reach back from the what-comes-next? of what we are reading to earliest infancy: being fed while not acting. Our expectations draw on our experience from the earliest moments of our lives to this moment right now. They span a wider range than, say, my expectations about doing a good job at the office or working out at the gym.

Within that wider expectation, we experience an emotionally charged dialectic between form and content. The form of the literary work satisfies (at least partly) our need to defend (and hence inhibit) our imaginings. We can let ourselves go more than ordinarily. We are freer than in daily life to project our wishes and fantasies into what we are perceiving. What we perceive in the literary work provides, as it were, pegs on which we can hang our own deepest and probably unconscious thoughts and feelings about mothers, fathers, lovers, children, authorities, government, work, space, love, hate--you name it--all the things that people our dreams. All this we put aside during the day. Sometimes at night, not just in dreams, but when we wake at 3 a.m. and our defenses are down, these deep, deep issues come up, and we worry. But with literature, form and our own habitual ways of dealing with these issues control and limit possible anxiety. We can project more freely into content. We span more and deeper wishes than when we focus on a goal in daily life.

Finally, we make the work "make sense." At the most basic level, we fit it into our everyday mental processing. The sitcom is over, we found the ending satisfactory, we turn off the television, and get ready for bed. But this is the least of "making sense." If we are experiencing literature wholly, we do not take away simple lessons, like what to do if your uncle murders your father and marries your mother. Instead, we need to reflect. We need to let our minds float, as it were, somewhere above that literal level. Reading Hamlet, I come face to face, as the Prince does, with a task too large for me, that complicated play itself. How will I respond? Will I, as he does, write a play of my own? Will I feel crazy? Betrayed? Will I, as he does, dither and dilly-dally and finally give up and say, "You (capital Y) take care of it"?

In short, when we make literature mean, when we make it "make sense" in more than mere coherence, we confront the strange perplexities of our mortal existence on this earth. We do not

find answers, we get questioning instead. Experiencing those questions is precisely Horace's prodesse. This, I think, is what Milton meant when he asked that readers bring "a spirit and judgment equal or superior" to what they are reading.

What they are reading may be the story of a Danish prince with soap opera troubles, but what a reader needs to bring to that story is a spirit and judgment open to experiencing the very essence of our human condition and predicament. Only then will that reader go beyond the pleasure of pretty pebbles or an evening's watching television. And, of course, a Titian will lend itself to that enlarged "making sense" more than a pretty pebble, and Hamlet will respond to an imaginative mind more than the latest movie for teenagers.

What we mean by "high" or "great" literature, then, is literature that allows us that larger range of brain activity that becomes an intense experience of informing pleasure, different from other kinds of pleasure, mental, not physical, yet somehow larger, more enriching, more enlightening and more questioning--and more delighting. It is my happiness to work as a teacher and critic of literature to train my students and readers to enjoy their brains' functioning in these more ranging and resilient ways. It is my pleasure to open to them the special pleasure of literature.

What this book has shown, I hope, is how, when we use our brains in special ways to achieve a literary work, we can, with the newness of birth, freshly sense our bodies and our world, relish our language, and experience our feelings for one another. Fully engaged with works of literature and the arts, we uncover our own individuality, opening ourselves to the largest truth of who we are, have been, and finally will be. That is the joy of literature that our brains make possible.