

Conjuring

In teaching I employed examples of great or near great art as unique objects to be valued for the power of their effect on us and then discussed in terms of what we, as writers, might learn from them. No criticism of the literature seminar kind, no odious comparisons, no argument against the teacher's idea as to the works' greatness or near greatness, no—or anyway no immediate—concern with Hemingway's overfed machismo, his and Dostoevsky's anti-Semitism, Flannery O'Connor's approval of Senator McCarthy. No looking at nationality, chronological division, moral character, race, sex. No categories or labels of any kind. Only this:

One: How did the writer make this good piece of art do its trick of turning becoming into being? And two: How did he or she conjure in us the passion that brought us, altered in our intelligence and senses, to our attempt at art?

If the magician who made our hair stand on end (the poet Housman's signal that high art is present) by telling us what we did not know we knew is only a woman or man like ourselves, what did he or she understand that we do not?

In reading stories and novels, we are, like the writer, traveling toward a guessed-at, unknown place, learning the road as we go. We will hear, for example—a rumor only—of the breaking up of a marriage but won't know why it is breaking up, the real why. We won't know what must happen when it does—the real *must* that comes from the characters as, over the course of our real and their fictional time, in our real and their fictional place, they become better known to us than any but the most intimate of our living friends.

At first it is only Tolstoy's lightly sketched Vronsky and Anna, things rather than people, unknowable before the fact: a womanly beauty on one side and on the other a charming aristocrat with a good seat on a horse and courage in the steeplechase. Our unperceived destination is found out by means of a rhythm of meetings—characters assemble and part, act upon and react to one another—that develop necessity as opposed to fortuity, impel inevitable talk and, subjected to an increasingly unforgiving, unflattering illumination of the story's darkest corners, compel inevitable events. Characters begin to become, as it were, real, and we help that to happen by our way of reading. By degrees, by the constant revisiting of our new friends in newly developed, increasingly compressed circumstances; by reading and rereading, feeling the weight of those layers of circumstance and talk as we feel the weight of

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water as we dive; by returning to that first meeting of the lovers in order to try them again, ourselves now prescient; by admitting the accidents of understanding that come from what we know and Tolstoy cannot, allowing to soak into the man's novel what breeds out of our own secrets—by these and much more we lend our lives to those lives and become them.

Shame shows up our shortcomings as well as Anna's, jealousy takes our sleep as it does hers, love our digestion. We are criminals or anyway required to answer to the charge. All the boiling, scattered nonsense and insights of the mind and senses in the destructive crisis of this love take us over and demand resolution—the provisional end of possibilities, the working out of the tragedy—so that when superb, lovable, *good* Anna goes under the train we go with her.

The student will always find out some of what the writer learned in the same order in which he or she learned it as long as the reading uncovers more than story—that surface excitement, that “hook” which makes us turn the page and which the novelist E.M. Forster called disparagingly a “tapeworm” because of its merely linear progression. And here the teacher's insistence on a subjective approach pays off. By being required to place our hand on the artist's in order to feel the temperature of the art as it is created, by learning how to make its people and events into ourselves, by a reading and rereading of the text that uncovers its bones, especially the construction of those paragraphs and lines that carried the images most wounding to us, we will alter and, in altering, begin to know how to use ourselves in art.

Since everyone brings his or her life to it, no two readers are reading the same book. The writer, moving on, rereads his work as something different from what it was when he wrote it. Even as he writes he changes. How can the author of chapter twenty entirely trust the relatively ignorant author of chapter one? It is a problem in the work process requiring constant return and revision. Rereading in middle age the novel by Tolstoy or Melville we read in college, we respond in another landscape, inner and outer, and are surprised by the degree to which the work has shifted its meaning. Science's restless explaining of phenomena, history's incessant accumulating and interpreting of data affect how we read and write as well as how we see. Yet there is a constancy of unalterable meaning in every great and very good work of art.

We can admit today what was inadmissible even a decade ago. We don't read Trollope in the twenty-first century as he was read in the nineteenth because science has taught us to declare aloud things the nineteenth century knew but was reluctant to utter, often even in the

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privacy of thought. And the twenty-second century will make the beginning of the twenty-first appear to be either prudish or mad, depending on the politics of morality and science then current. In 1940, anyway in middle class America, it was generally agreed that incest was something that had happened in a play by Sophocles and wasn't going to happen again. In 1870, if the reader was sophisticated, Anna Karenina was a pretty, foolish society matron with too much time on her hands; in 1900 she was a fallen woman, in 1970 a victim of the patriarchy, in 2000 a model of moral courage and independence. For artists at any time she is our wife, and we know why she left us. It is now all but a convention, thanks to Freud and others, that an actor will make overt use of Hamlet's rage at his mother as something that contains a sexual substructure because it helps him more completely to become the Prince. Juniors in high school know that Jim and Huckleberry are no longer only friends making an argument against oppression but creatures touched by love, something of which Mark Twain, a good artist and no fool, had to be aware, at least in the closet of his mind.

These matters are in the weave of the work waiting for us to find them out. Tolstoy's and Sophocles's terms of reference are not the same as ours, but their art knew what they had guessed—that sons will be seduced by mothers and that Anna will give herself to the god and die, not because of a consciousness of sin but because of the shame of having betrayed her son and husband. If the reader is not wounded by shame as well, he has not learned to read.