

***What Good is Literature?***  
**Looking Back; Looking Forward**

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- Why talk about literature in an age that is moving *away* from print culture?
- What is literature?
- Why study it?
- Why study it here at Bryn Athyn College?

**I. Why make a case for literature, now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?**

We live in an age when electronic media (radio, television, film, the Internet) seem to be carrying us at the speed of light *away* from books and print culture, or at least the old views of literature, authors, readers, and texts. Things are definitely changing. And it is absolutely true that print culture, as compared to other media, has only a sliver of the enormous influence it used to have in society. It is hard even to imagine how central writing and literature were in a culture that had *no* electronic forms of communication. But acknowledging that literature has lost a great deal of influence is not the same thing as saying it ought to disappear entirely, or insisting that it will.

There are all sorts of hysterical responses to the so-called death of literature. Some say literature is dead, and good riddance. Others say literature is dead, and there goes civilization along with it. Neither extreme is true. It *is* true, however, that change brings anxiety. Electronic and digital culture have brought enormous change, and enormous anxiety about the place of books and literature and reading.

In order to relax a little about where literature is now, it helps to look back at the huge transitions it has *already* weathered as it moved from oral traditions, to written culture, to print media, to electronic society. Each new technology changed literature. Each transition produced anxiety about the death of the old forms. And yet the study and love of something called *literature* survives. Examples of these major transitions follow (drawn from Kernan, Death of Literature):

One of the things Plato did, way back in 5<sup>th</sup> Century Greece, was to *write down* what his teacher Socrates *said*. The relatively new invention of alphabetical writing allowed for very subtle distinctions and abstract concepts. Ironically, a number of the dialogues Plato wrote down argue that writing, this increasingly dominant new medium, endangered knowledge since it offered “no opportunity

for dialectic questioning and clarifications” (Eric Havelock, quoted in Kernan, 128-129). There goes Plato, experimenting with new technology, and ruining thought.

In the late 1400s, as manuscript culture was dying out and print culture was dawning, another kind of anxiety swept the learned world. Take the example of John Trithemius, an abbot in charge of one of the last scriptoria. Trithemius complained bitterly of the newcomer “print” and its bad effect on written (hand-written) texts: “As the scribe is copying the approved texts he is gradually initiated into the divine mysteries and miraculously enlightened. Every word we write is imprinted more forcefully on our minds since we have to take our time while writing and reading” (Kernan 129). Can you imagine what Trithemius would have thought of spell check?

In the late 1700s, three centuries after the printing press, printed matter was so widespread that society feared a “literacy crisis.” Too much reading, especially by the lower classes, would damage morals and health. A 1795 tract warns of the dangers of rampant literacy: colds, headaches, rashes, gout, arthritis, asthma, epilepsy, migraines, pulmonary disease ... and my favorite, just in case you escaped all the above, “hypochondria” (Darnton 1986, cited in Kernan 130-131). Apparently the old way of having just a few books, in the right houses, read in the right way (over and over), was somehow healthier for mind, body, and society than the new flood of print and reading.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century brought us electronic culture. In spite of benefiting from its enormous advances and gifts, many of us complain of feeling bombarded. Unconnected bits of information, noise, color, images, come at us like shrapnel. A spray of sensation whose primary purpose seems to be to circumvent thought and reflection. Clearly, a steady diet of *only* this sort of stimulation undermines thought, reflection, and creativity. But I don’t think we are teetering on the edge of some virtual abyss. Books, and literature, and appreciation for powerful uses of language will not disappear any time soon. And the threat of their loss, in fact, can teach us a new appreciation.

In this 21<sup>st</sup> century, the face and features of literature will change again; we can count on that. Technology has always changed literature because literature is a human product, written for and by people. If we are willing to embrace some changes, while holding fast to a sense of the importance of literature, then literature will go on surviving both within, and alongside, our electronic media. Electronic and audiovisual culture will no doubt dominate until the next revolution, but just because a new form dominates does not mean it eclipses the old forms. If this is the age of computers, one critic argues, it is also the age of other things, like the wheel, or fire. Specifically, television did not replace radio, and neither of them replaced newspapers, and apparently, gossip is still around. We do not enter the digital age “as if emigrating to a new country.” The past, and the inventions and cultural products of the past, lie all around us (Paulson 137, 22). This includes literature. Which brings us the question of definitions.

## II. What is literature?

Literary studies cover a lot of ground, from epic to short story, poetry to drama, essays to editorials, novels to well-written e-mail. Obviously the term *well-written* is understood to apply to all the genres just mentioned. And by singling out e-mail I'm not at all suggesting that e-mail *ought* to be well-written, only that *when* it is well-written it just might end up as literature, whether it likes it or not. That is a funny thing about literature—although some things are born literary, others become literary, and still others have literariness thrust upon them (Eagleton 8).

Take Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address, delivered in 1865 at the end of a bloody war. The last sentence begins with those now familiar words "With malice toward none; with charity for all," and ends with a call to national and global healing, "let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds.... to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with other nations." Is this history? Philosophy? Political rhetoric? Clearly no one liked it much at the time. But today we find it in any number of anthologies of literature. Where it belongs. The short address covers the two poles often identified with literary work, that is, it is both *self-reflexive* and also *referential*. *Self-reflexive* (semiotic) simply means drawing attention to the language itself; *referential* means pointing outward toward the world. We might also think in terms of writing that is opaque (we look *at* the language or form), and language that is transparent (we look *through* it to meaning). When a piece of writing does both these things, it often ends up as literature.

Lincoln's address is literature partly because of its linguistic qualities-- the texture, shape, and color of the words on the page and in the air; and it is literature partly because of its semantic effect--the meanings these sentences and allusions unleash. But it also literature for the simple reason that enough people say it is. If nobody cares enough to read, and reread, and teach, and pass on something called literature, then truly it disappears.

So who decides what is literature and what is not? What are the standards? We might all agree that Sophocles, Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare, and the like ought to pass through. Green light for Dickens, Eliot, Emerson, and Frost. But did the light perhaps turn yellow on that unpublished slave narrative? What about that native American myth that may or may not have been tampered with by the Jesuit priest who wrote it down? Was the light nearly orange when Stephen King streaked through?

If we cannot agree absolutely on what literature is and which texts qualify, how do we begin to discuss the purpose and use of literature? Does disagreement mean that "Chaos has come again," that "sheer anarchy is loosed upon the ... campus"? Great and mighty scholars disagree about literature, especially the literary canons--which books or writers are in, which are out. To be honest, I love the debate. I am comforted that intelligent, educated people fight for the things they love. And it does come down to love. Whether we attend school for three years or thirty, in the end, the *only* great books will be the ones we love. And literary classics, though they may start out as the books *other* people love and

force us to read, do not *remain* classics unless the next generation of readers and teachers loves them too, at least enough to beat other people into submission.

I like the debates, not because people cannot agree, but because they care deeply, and the literature itself is still speaking, in different ways to different people. I don't want Dickens or Melville to mean exactly the same thing to my students as they mean to me. I do want students to see how *much* the literature means to me, to know something of *what* these writers have meant to other generations and why, to try on perspectives they would never have come to on their own, and finally, to listen very carefully for how these echoes of voices from the past resonate in the chambers of their own minds. Because this is partly what literature is, the voices of the past in dialogue with our own.

Certainly some students get anxious when they discover, fairly early in their college career that, in literary studies at least, there is seldom one right answer that everyone agrees is true, no air tight explanations to be dropped into their minds like canned goods into a shopping cart. It is in fact the struggle for meaning that matters, the willingness to tangle with a text, come out changed in some way, for the good. Like Jacob wrestling with the angel, when I go into a literary text I expect to come out limping, but with a new name, richer dreams, and a clearer sense of direction. Literature and literary study remind us that the mind is a complex organ capable of processing information and digesting knowledge in order to fuel new thoughts, perspectives, and actions. Great books and great writers change the way people think and feel, and people in turn change the world. Education had better be about transformation, or we ought not to engage in it at all, at least not at a New Church college.

The word "literature" is a slippery term. Once upon a time it meant anything written down. Gradually it became identified with specific kinds of writing. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, "literature" encompassed the whole body of valued writing in society: philosophy, history, essays, letters, poetry. A text was "literary" if it conformed to the standards of "polite letters," that is, embodied the values of a particular class. These were of course the 18<sup>th</sup> century values of Reason, Order, and Propriety (Eagleton 17). Early in 19<sup>th</sup> century, on the other hand, literature began to develop much more in the direction we might recognize today, narrowing to work that was specifically creative or imaginative. But at the same time that the scope of writing narrowed, the meaning of the word "imagination" enlarged. For the romantics, the faculty of imagination was constructive, visionary, and profoundly human. Creative or imaginative literature rebelled against the cold reason of science and the mind-numbing effects of industrialization. Poets were the heroes of society, speaking for the common people, and poetry became a religion of sorts. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the pendulum had swung. Literary art became less integrated with the world and more defined by its isolation and alienation from social life. Suddenly we have the aesthetic movement, and art for art's sake (Eagleton 17-21). And we have not even mentioned the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was an absolute beehive of activity in terms of literary studies.

So literature means one thing in one generation and something else in another. And even the *same* pieces of writing that are valued across many centuries, will usually be valued for quite different reasons.

For the purpose of this talk I want to define literature as anything well-written that people care enough to read, preserve, and pass on. It might have started life on a cave wall or a bathroom stall, but if it uses language in a way that makes us notice the language itself, and if it says something that matters enough that we do not want to forget it but want it to live in our minds and be written on our hearts, then we have literature. The best way to make a thought last is to put it memorable language. Most of the Bible is written in poetry, not because that is the way people used to speak but because poetry, for much of human history, has been the way we express, and remember, what matters.

The definition of literature as well-written texts that people care enough to read and pass on is obviously broad and simplistic. I am aware that the main purpose of definitions is to annoy people, to inspire them to raise exceptions and questions. What does it mean that something is written well? Doesn't the criterion change with the times? Who wields the resources to preserve and pass on literature? Some cynics say that literature is simply "what gets taught" (Roland Barthes), the implication being that whacko academics decide what they like, call it literature, and force it on unsuspecting students. This certainly happens, but from my experience it is not pervasive, nor self-perpetuating. I was forced to study texts in high school, college, and graduate school that did not, in the end, bring me knowledge, insight or pleasure. But these texts do not resurface in my thoughts or on my syllabi.

Then there is the even more vexed question of goodness. What is *good* literature? Good for whom? In what category do we place texts that are well-written but for harmful purposes? What about divine literature which is manipulated for evil ends? God knows the Good Book in the wrong hands has wrought tremendous suffering.

This last question of moral content or intention is easier to address than some of the other questions, especially in terms of teaching. I choose to teach only those works that lend themselves to a good end. If we add this last qualification to our working definition we get a view of literature as anything well-written that people care enough to read, preserve and pass on, which serves a good end.

This brings us to Part III, the value of studying literature.

### **III. Why study literature?**

The only good reason to study literature is that it can lead to good outcomes. These outcomes might be to entertain or move, to inspire or horrify, to uplift, refine or awaken. I consider a valid educational goal anything that strengthens the mind or opens the heart, thus enriches our capacity for being human. By human I mean the exercise of reason, compassion, creativity, judgment, justice, curiosity, and kindness. Obviously other pursuits or fields of study exercise these same qualities. In terms of teaching and learning, there is nothing *more* valuable in studying literature than any of the other liberal arts. A

novel or poem, carefully read and appreciated, is not *better* than a mathematical equation perfectly balanced, or a musical chord exquisitely rendered, or a drop of blood magnified and blooming under a microscope. Every field of study has unique qualities that make it a priceless tool for enriching human understanding and, hopefully, helping us experience that the world around us is charged with the grandeur of God. But *since* every field is unique, let me say three things about the unique gifts literary study can bring.

First, literature is the most exciting time machine we have. Through it we not only learn about the past but inhabit the minds of the past. Literature allows us to experience people's thoughts and feelings from the inside. History tells us what happened in the past, and literature tells us what it felt like to the people living there. What did they care enough about to struggle to express in the most powerful words possible? Literature is not just words "about" the past but "from" the past (Paulson 139). These words are a crucial part of our cultural memory, "a web of words," as one critic describes it, "through which we access and activate an enormous range of attempts to know, imagine, and reinvent the world" (Paulson 190-91).

Literature is not only a time machine to carry us back, but to keep the past current. Thanks to literature we live in a world permeated by powerful thoughts and feelings from the past. In his more depressed moods, Karl Marx saw this as cause for despair: "The traditions of all the dead generations weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living" (Paulson 128). The poet Wallace Stevens, on the other hand, saw this ongoing presence of the past as the very condition for art:

*From this the poem springs that we live in a place  
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves*

The word education is related to the word "educare," to lead out. One of the goals of studying literature is to help students see *beyond* their limited perspectives and experiences.

Second point about literature's peculiar gifts: Literary texts use the medium of language in a way that startles us into recognizing hidden sources of power. For the most part, the language we use on a daily basis is as common as dust or air. It is how we think, and communicate, and carry on. We pass it back and forth like worn out coins, getting the things we want. But every now and then we come across language whose beauty and restraint speak to us. Then we discover that the dusty shoes that have done a pretty good job of taking us everywhere we thought we wanted to go, are also ruby slippers, capable of another thing. Not a greater thing, not the only thing, but an important thing. When we read words that move us, whether they are four thousand years old, or four days, we come home to something. Not only did the Word, the breathe of God, begin it all, but words themselves are what last... words spoken, sung, chanted, whispered, written down, passed on. Isn't it amazing that something as ephemeral as words survive? The things they are recorded on certainly do not—stone walls, papyri, sheepskins, cloth, paper, microchips, hard drives. All words are hopelessly fragile, but some survive because people love them, and record them, and translate them, and keep passing them on.

Literature stops us in our tracks and says “look what language can do,” like discovering that the door mat, which does a great job of trapping dirt, can also be used as magic carpet. Literature lifts us above our house and neighborhood to show us all the same things from a new angle. Really good literature helps us *see* for the first time places we have looked out a million times. This idea of making the familiar unfamiliar in order to help us see freshly is common to all the arts, but especially powerful in literature where the medium itself is the very words we use every day.

Third gift that the study of literature brings: in addition to the benefits of time machines, ruby slippers, and magic carpets, reading literature enriches our vocabulary and thinking. When we read powerful texts from the past, or from the present, our own thinking takes on new color. Literature can literally change the way we experience the world around us. Once we have experienced at a deep level the literary image of a flame in a crocus, or a line of daffodils dancing in the sun, actual flowers will bloom for us with a new energy every spring. Just as natural landscapes inspire literature, so literary landscapes alter nature. To quote Wallace Stevens again, “It is not only that imagination adheres to reality, but, also, that reality adheres to the imagination, that the interdependence is essential” (Paulson 126).

Studying literature teaches us to be careful with language. It trains us to think deeply and clearly. It allows us to inhabit other worlds and other minds, without letting go of our own. It give us insights in a moment that may have cost the writer a lifetime.

These are all worthy reasons to study literature, and for these reasons, and others, institutions of higher education, worldwide, teach literature. But are there *additional* reasons that a New Church college should foster literary studies? This brings us to the last question.

#### **IV. Why study literature at a New Church college? (4 reasons)**

1) First, Swedenborg recommends literature. In a letter to his brother-in-law Benzelius (August 1711) he writes, “Here are also grand English poets who are worth reading through on account of their imagination [*inventioner*].” He lists Dryden, Spenser, Waller, Milton, Cowley, Beaumont and Fletcher, Shakespeare, and Jonson, among others (Acton 30). Swedenborg’s own writing, particularly his theological work, makes allusions to Classic, Medieval, Renaissance and Enlightenment literature. Here and there he even cites the Bible. By direct statement and by example, then, Swedenborg indicates that familiarity with literature enriches understanding.

2) The second reason that a New Church college should foster literary studies is that the Writings say amazing things about language, communication, and the importance of writing, both on earth and in heaven. Beautiful teachings about correspondences, the role of affections, and the interweaving of substance and form, content and style, provide rich ground for exploring the forms and meanings of literary works. To give a few examples: *True Christian Religion*

(#814) speaks of the importance of writing to thought and freedom; *Heaven and Hell* (#260) addresses the profound power of heavenly writing to express things that cannot be expressed in speech; *Arcana Coelestia* (#9386) states that “to write means to imprint on the life”; and *Spiritual Experiences* (#2472) describes words as vessels containing infinite things. Ralph Waldo Emerson said 150 years ago, “There is one man of genius...whose literary value has never yet been rightly estimated—I mean Emanuel Swedenborg. The most imaginative of men, yet writing with the precision of a mathematician.... He pierced the emblematic or spiritual character of the visible, audible, tangible world” (*American Scholar*, 1837). Many good studies have been done since Emerson’s time, but far greater things lie ahead. We have barely scratched the surface.

3) A third reason for studying literature at a New Church college really applies to all the liberal arts. Our students need to understand and love the common ground they share with a much broader culture so that when they go out to share the Writings, they are already connected. To recognize what is new we must know what went before. Our students will be more successful ambassadors if they go out with an appreciation for what is out there and some humility for how we fit into a larger picture.

4) A fourth (final) reason for pursuing literary studies at a New Church college is to train students in the art of reading, writing, analysis, and interpretation. This is especially important given our church’s large theological canon. We need a new generation of *active* readers of the Word. Just as important as the effort to get more readers of the Writings, I believe, is the effort to get more *readings* of the Writings.

Reading is a participation sport, and meaning is always partially constructed by our interaction with the text.

As a literary critic and life-long reader, I am moved by the Lord’s words in Luke (10:26) to the man who comes and asks what he should do to earn eternal life. The Lord answers, as He so often does, by asking a question, really two questions. Now surely the God of heaven and earth, the Word made flesh, Truth itself, could give the right answer. Instead, the Lord sends the man back to a written text with his first question, “What is written?” and then immediately asks a second question, as if the answer to the first question is inextricable from the answer to the second question.... “How do you read?” He did not ask “What does the law say?” Rather, “What is written? How do you read?” The presence of the Lord is absolute. Divine truth in its essence does not change. But it comes to us *through* written texts, which are themselves accommodations, and we have to read these texts and wrestle with them to make them speak. Many texts, many readings. A threefold revelation; four gospels; twelve gates into the city; and in the Nunc Licet Temple, a sword of truth turning in *all* directions. The Lord, I think, is not a fan of mono-logue. Holding firm to one’s beliefs is crucial and deeply spiritual. However, insisting on one’s *own* reading as synonymous with “what is written” can be suffocating.

I think our church today needs more air. I think we are not going to find slews of new readers *out there* until we encourage more readings *in here*. In our treatment of one another we do not show nearly enough respect for the Lord’s

question “How do you read?” One of the great things Bryn Athyn College can do for the church is to model professional and charitable dialogue. Model different ways to analyze and experience these sacred texts, different ways to apply the passages to different fields, model a variety of ways of reading to open up new meanings and nuances in these precious books. This may sound scary. Will it lead down a slippery slope of relativity into an ocean of anything goes? I honestly do not think so. Swedenborg describes gatherings in the spiritual world where the search for truth and understanding takes place through various groups sharing different readings and perspectives, supplementing and building on one another, gradually moving toward increased enlightenment through respectful hearing of a variety of views (TCR 48). If we keep the Lord first in our minds, and shun evils, and pray for understanding, then our readings can be like the sword in the temple turning *beautifully* in a number of directions.

So I am not afraid of too many readings. What concerns me is too few. I do not want to see the next generation, or the ones after, stop reading the Writings altogether because they have been told one too many times, “This is what is written,” without the follow up question, “How do you read?”

These deep questions about “how” to read, or “what,” or “why,” become all the more important in an age that seems to discourage, or at least distract us from, careful reading. There are good reasons for everyone to read and study literature, at least a little bit. And good reasons for some of us to do it a lot. Great reasons to do it *here* at Bryn Athyn College, and *now* in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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