Receiving Literature

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> She marked her place with a yarrow stem and closed the book and set it on her lap. She wondered if literature might lose some of its interest when she reached an age or state of mind where her life was set on such a sure course that the things she read might stop seeming so powerfully like alternate directions for her being.[1]

Karen Krasny taps into an emerging interdisciplinary conversation on relations between the brain, consciousness, art, and morality. Neuroscientists, philosophers, linguists, and practitioners in many fields are raising questions about how artistic, moral, and educational practices reflect the functioning of the brain.[2] At the same time, Krasny's penultimate topic — which I take to be the moral, affective, and aesthetic consequences of reading literature — taps into a current conversation between teachers, teacher educators, humanities scholars, parents, and others. On the one hand, these persons are worried that today's standardized testing regimes are driving out of the classroom sustained engagement with literature. On the other hand, they are troubled by what they perceive as the reductionistic approach to literature advocated by William Bennett and others, in which literature is treated as a means to teach morals didactically.[3] I sense that Krasny endorses the view that reading good literature embodies its own moral, aesthetic, and intellectual values, and that talking about good literature diffuses these values into culture and society.

In this response, I will focus on two resources I believe Krasny can profitably draw upon as she links these conversations. They are Dewey's view of mind and consciousness and recent literature on the moral influence of literary art.

Dewey's understanding of mind and consciousness is closely allied with his view of moral sympathy and imagination. According to Dewey, mind and consciousness emerge from human embeddedness in the world. Put another way, mind emerges from and in human engagement with the world. Mind presupposes the brain and its biochemical and genetic structures. But mind is neither reducible to nor explainable in terms of the operation of those structures. Mind is always embodied, embedded, and constituted by and through interaction.

According to Dewey, consciousness also emerges from and through interaction. It does not denote a particular entity, but rather is a serviceable name for those phases of experience when the individual or community is aware of the elements constituting interaction, including self, other, and world. In this view, intelligence (or the application of mind through consciousness) becomes not a psychological or mental phenomenon but rather a name for the deliberate attempt to convert this awareness of elements into the realization of aims and purposes. For Dewey, intelligence is a characteristic of certain kinds of action rather than a substance that can be measured with a psychological dipstick.

I wonder about the metaphorical tropes Krasny deploys, such as the idea of emotions and feelings "playing out [respectively] in the theater" of the body and

mind. This image conjures notions of the self as spectator, as inhabiting a prior space, place, and temporal order divorced from the rest of being. The image appears again in Krasny's analysis of how a person reacts to works of art such as Picasso's *Guernica* or Sylvia Plath's poetry. For example, she writes that the "actual sight" of the painting "can trigger neural and chemical responses leading to visceral changes." Dewey would ask whether this portrait of stimulus-response constitutes a classic instance of the philosophical fallacy in which the inquirer converts the results of inquiry into its preconditions. He argues that the idea of a stimulus is incoherent unless the person is already responding to his or her environment in a process that draws continuously on that person's history in the world. In the absence of such a responsive mode, the so-called stimulus — in this case, Picasso's painting — literally has no identity. It is simply a brute event. Correspondingly, Dewey argues, every response a person has to the world calls out new stimuli which the person takes up. I look at *Guernica* and recoil from its portrayal of violence; that response leads me to ponder the details of the painting; those details trigger ideas, images, feelings, and conjectures; these turn me to additional aspects of the work of art and perhaps to larger musings about war, peace, and politics. Stimulus and response emerge in and through interaction.[4]

In sum, I think Krasny's argument would be substantially enriched, and perhaps transformed, if she fused her analysis of Dewey's view of moral sympathy and imagination with his perspective on mind and consciousness. His interactive, or transactive, view of mind and world offers useful perspectives for the current conversation on neuroscience and art.

Let me turn now to the second resource I would encourage her to draw upon as she pursues this project. For me, Krasny's sketch of Lynn Hunt's analysis of the epistolary novel and its social effects is the most fascinating moment in the paper, in part because I feel we are finally getting to literature. I wonder here whether Krasny is familiar with scholarship on the moral relationship between novels and readers for that work raises questions pertinent to her project.[5] For example, how might we elucidate the experience every novel reader can attest to, or so it seems, of being privy in a moral rather than voyeuristic sense to the landscape of other peoples' lives? How should we describe the experience of moral intimacy, moral bewilderment, and moral resolution readers often share with literary characters? When Krasny spotlights Hunt's point about "the sense of interior likeness" that the eighteenth century novel brought to life for people, I think of the fact that novelists' use of first names for their characters constituted in itself an unsettling act. Given the rigid class divisions between readers and the forms of address associated with them, it must have been remarkable for many men and women to be suddenly on a first-name basis with individuals (however fictional) from all walks of life. It must have been equally experimental and consequential to talk with others about these novels. In this regard, I am puzzled by Hunt's claim, as Krasny renders it, "that reading epistolary novels produced somatic effects that once mapped and stored in the brain came back out as new concepts about the organization of social and political life." To me, these terms border on the solipsistic, as if human beings have an interior and

private polis. Are not communication and participation in the world necessary for such concepts to take form?

I think that pursuing these questions would be more productive for Krasny than binding her project too closely to the distinction she draws, building on Hunt, between a Foucauldian view of the self and the view of the self she develops from recent writing on the brain. For one thing, Foucault's notion of the self underwent considerable evolution in his work, ending with his striking ruminations on "care for the self."[6] For another thing, the distinction Krasny draws has limited (albeit real) heuristic value. It's simply not the case that we have to base our view of the self either on social determinism or on neuroscientific explanation. Human beings become who and what they are as a result of both biochemical and social processes, not to mention processes we can describe through concepts such as narrative, moral life, dialogue, deliberation, remembrance (not to be confused with memory), and many more. The question of the self can never be reduced to an either/or, if only because such a distinction immediately presumes a third possibility — a lovely lesson taught time and again by literature.

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1. Charles Frazier, *Cold Mountain* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 328.

2. According to the art historian David Freedberg, "Recent brain research has begun to significantly augment our understanding of art. This is an amazing moment where for the first time we will clearly be able to see how science can illuminate our understanding of and responses to art, and therefore the ways in which students of the humanities, musicians, composers, and writers, can inform neurosciences of the vagaries of human behavior." Freedberg points enthusiastically to what he sees as "remarkable discoveries about vision, recognition of faces, places and bodies, emotional responses, memory, and a variety of sensual responses to the world around us, including to works of art." See http://www.italianacademy.columbia.edu/events/symposiums_sp06_newbiology.htm and http://www.italianacademy.columbia.edu/pdfs/newbiology.pdf.

3. William J. Bennett, *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories* (New York: Simon Schuster, 1993).

4. John Dewey, "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology," (1895–1898), in *John Dewey: The Early Works, 1882–1898,* vol. 5, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 96–109.

5. See, for example, Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York: Basic Books, 1978); Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970); and Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

6. Michel Foucault, "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *The Final Foucault,* eds. James Bernauer and David Rasmussen (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), 1–20.