

Why Literature?

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Introduction:

The question Why Literature? may seem overly ambitious for a lecture but it is as important as it is wide ranging, especially in today's university, where the study of language and literature, indeed liberal education in general, so often meets with contempt, and is threatened with extinction.

Tonight I want to ask that question in a somewhat unusual way, hoping thereby to shed some fresh light on issues that range from the place of literature in our increasingly visual culture, to the question of why reading literature, especially what I will call "extreme" literature remains such a powerful experience.

The lecture is a diptych. It begins with the question "Why literature?" in a historical sense: Why did people start writing poems and stories in the first place? It's a surprising story that has helped me understand something we might call "extreme literature," and its implications, some of which will be explored in the second part of this diptych. There I want to explore what happens when we read "extreme" literature, that is works that

¹ I am very grateful to Prof. Silvia Rode of the Department of Classical and Modern Languages at the University of Southern Indiana for inviting me to speak on this topic, and to Prof. Michael Dixon and his students for performing the "experiment" described below.

may be chronologically or culturally remote from us, and are often extremely challenging, in part because they deal with intense, often unconventional situations and emotions. I want to suggest that “extreme” literature is where we need to turn in extreme situations.

Part One, Historical: Why did people start writing literature?

As best we can tell, literature, that is written poems and stories, came out of oral performances. All the societies of the ancient world, it appears, were robust oral cultures; eventually they all developed means of writing, though not all of them developed strong literary traditions.

The first scratches and scrawls that tell us that writing was being invented appear in an arc from Egypt, through Mesopotamia, modern Iraq, over to Pakistan, in the second half of the fourth millennium before our era. This may have happened in Egypt maybe as early as 3300 BCE; in Mesopotamia around 3100.

Writing proved very useful in all sorts of ways, asserting ownership over a prized object, in trade, record keeping, legal matters and so on. But close to a millennium passed before it was used for writing literature.

A woman may have made the breakthrough: Enhedušna, an Akkadian priestess of approximately 2285 – 2250 BCE wrote a series of religious texts -- epithets for invoking the gods and hymns in their honor . We may be tempted to dismiss this as “sub-literary” but it was an important step beyond the earlier largely bureaucratic uses of literacy. Real story telling in

written forms comes later, probably with the Gilgamesh epic. The historic Gilgamesh was king of Uruk in Mesopotamia, around 2500 before our era. Stories about him circulated in oral form for many centuries before a version of his story was written down in cuneiform; the earliest texts we have probably date to the 18th century before our era -- in other words, twenty or thirty generations after his rule and fifty or sixty generations after the invention of writing.²

Why did it take so long for writing to be used for literature? For two reasons – first, oral performance probably seemed just fine to most people. Indeed, they continued to be the primary way people experienced poetry and story-telling long after literary texts appeared.³ It's still true today: most people prefer a poetry reading, or an audio-book, or a motion picture adaptation to reading a text.

Second, reading or writing texts of any length was hard work. Producing such a text, moreover, was expensive. This was surely true of cuneiform texts, with their tiny, wedge syllables pressed into clay tablets the size of cell phones. That took many hours of skilled labor.

Greek texts were far easier to read, since the Greeks used a genuine alphabet of 24 letters, complete with vowels, unlike the vowel-less model of Phoenician script they adopted. But

² Much of the epic survives only in later texts, the so-called 'Standard Version, dating to the eight century BCE.

³ Plato [Ion_535d_](#) suggests that as many as 20,000 people may have attended such performances by rhapsodes., perhaps a gross exaggeration SIZE OF EPIDAUROS THEATER? On performances in antiquity see Martin West "The Homeric Question Today " [Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society](#) 155, 4 (2011) pp. 383 – 93, esp. p. 390, and (specifically onj the Panathenaea at Athens H.A. Shapiro, "Musikoi Agones: Music and Poetry at the Panathenaia," in J. Neils ed., Goddess and Polis. The Panathenaic Festival in Ancient Athens (Princeton 1992) 53-75, esp. 72.

producing such a text was very expensive. I have been collecting evidence about the cost of texts in Greek and Latin, and will post a summary of what I have found on my web site www.wrobertconnor.com/. But you can see for yourself by performing a simple experiment : transcribe any continuous text for an hour and see how much you can copy. Do it in the ancient manner, using ink; write only in capital letters, without punctuation marks . It is easy, you will find, to make mistakes, so be very careful. No erasing. Once you have determined how much you can copy per hour, set your hourly rate for this skilled work. Then calculate how long it would take to copy a major work of literature this way, and what you would charge for it.

When the students in Prof. Michael Dixon's class did this experiment they estimated they could copy an average of 50 lines per hour, and set their hourly rate at anywhere from \$8.00 to \$50. (One student said she couldn't possibly be paid enough to make her willing to do such excruciating work.) Since Homer's Iliad is about 16,000 lines long, at these rate such a text would cost between \$2560 and \$16,000 (plus materials). Those figures are actually rather close to estimates derived from ancient evidence.

The point, however, is not the accuracy of such calculations. It is that under any reasonable estimate books were very expensive until the invention of movable type. That simple fact has several important implications. First, only the wealthy could afford books. Second, even wealthy people were likely to own "good books but few," they probably expected to re-read them frequently, rather than skimming through one after another. Writers, in turn, could expect repeated scrutiny from

their readers, and write in ways that sustained such re-reading. They would understand Ezra Pound's definition of literature as "news that STAYS news."⁴

Third, and most important, texts that have been repeatedly transcribed come with a company of witnesses who attest its value, and shift the questions that a new reader must ask. Those questions are not "Do I like this book?", "Does it keep me entertained?", "Does it advance the causes to which I am committed?", or "Does it measure up to my critical standards?" Instead one needs to ask "What did those who expended such effort and treasure to acquire and transmit this work find in it that was so important to them?" I will come back to this mode of reading at the end of the lecyre.

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When written literature finally emerged it came on big time. Literature, it appears, didn't begin with short, easily inscribed poems, epigrams, love poems, lyrics. It started big, with epic. That seems to have been the case in the ancient near east with the Gilgamesh epic, and later in Greece with the Homeric epics.

That, of course, was a good deal later. The Greeks of the second millennium BCE knew how to write and used that knowledge much as their ancient near eastern predecessors had -- to keep the records of palace economies. But there is no trace of poetry in the clay tablets that survived the cataclysms that destroyed Mycenaean civilization late in the

⁴ Ezra Pound ABC of Reading, Chapter Three (London, Faber and Faber, 1951) p. 29.

second millennium. The Greeks learned to read and write again in the eighth century BCE, but it appears that using literacy for literature took a long time in Greece as it had in Mesopotamia. The writing of the Homeric epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey must have come only after the Greeks became accustomed to working with long, complex texts – law codes for example. This was probably in the second half of the seventh century before our era.⁵

How do written epics, Gilgamesh and the Homeric epics, compare to the oral story telling that preceded them? We can approach that question in two ways. First we can note that over long periods stories about great heroes tend to fall into a pattern. In many cultures a famous hero is reputed to have a divine parent, narrowly escape death as a child, is sent away from his homeland, subdues a wild and powerful adversary, and eventually returns to his homeland and becomes its ruler, though eventually is driven out and dies a mysterious death.⁶ Various texts relating to Gilgamesh fit this pattern well enough to let us conjecture that his adventures were sometimes told in this form. The text of the Gilgamesh epic, however, differs from the pattern in significant respects, as we shall see.

The other way to understand the relationship between oral tradition and these written epics is to compare the texts with the performances of oral bards who until recently sang of the

⁵ This dating suggests that within a generation or two the Homeric epics were part of a literary explosion, with poems by Hesiod, Archilochus, Sappho and Alcaeus and others all appearing within a relatively short period of time. Literary prose is much slower to develop.

⁶ Lord Raglan The Hero. Gilgamesh fits this pattern about as well as Bellerophon and Jason, but not as closely as Oedipus, Theseus or Moses.

exploits of great men. These bards, from the south Slavic region of the former Yugoslavia, Crete and elsewhere were illiterate but highly skilled verbal craftsmen. One of the great breakthroughs of classical scholarship in the twentieth century was the recognition by a young scholar, Milman Parry, that the compositional technique of these bards closely resembled that behind the Homeric poems.⁷ As he and his associates travelled into the mountains where these performances were still to be heard, he saw that the bards did not have a script. If they had had one, they could not have read it, for they were illiterate. Nor had they memorized some great performance of the past. They retold the story afresh each time, composing on the spot, using metrically convenient phrases, “formulae” we call them. If you are reading Home and keep bumping into the phrase “Peleus’ son Achilles,” rather than just “Achilles,” put yourself in the shoes of an oral poet. You need to produce metrically correct lines all through your performance. You have to keep the story moving forward, and sustain the pace, no matter how tired you may be getting. Saying “Achilles” doesn’t help much, but in Greek, “Peleus’ son, Peleiados Achilleos, provides the last three feet of an epic hexameter.⁸

⁷ Albert Lord Singer of Takes , originally published in Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature 24 (1960); second edition edited by Gregory Nagy. Nagy’s essay “Orality and Literacy” in the Encyclopedia of Rhetoric (ed. T. O. Sloane; Oxford 2001) provides an indispensable survey of oral poetics.

⁸ For the archive of oral literature recorded by Milman Parry and others see <http://chs119.chs.harvard.edu/mpc/> . A 33 rpm recording “Moral Greek Heroic Oral Poetry” was produced by the Ethnic Folkways Library, recorded and with notes by James A. Notopoulos. (New York, Folkways Records, 1959).

But while the phraseology and versification of these early epics is very similar to the way oral bards sing, and the subject matter concerns the exploits of great warriors, there are three differences between the texts of these early epics and oral epic poetry. First, the written epics are longer than almost any orally performed heroic poetry; second, the texts are more complex, interwoven: later passages evoke earlier ones, and themes are richly developed. Third, the emotions explored are not primarily the ones that usually characterize oral heroic poetry -- strength, generosity, courage, bravery, loyalty to family and clan, military valor, fortitude. In effect, in a good oral performance the bard tells not just a good, fast paced story, but one that resonates with the conventions, the values and the pride of his audience. Yes, all those qualities can be found in the early written epics, but the focus is elsewhere.

The writer has the opportunity to do something more challenging, more penetrating, more extreme. His relationship with the reader, the unusual person willing to purchase a long and expensive text and read and re-read it carefully is quite different from the oral poet's performance. Let me show what I mean by looking at each of the three earliest written epics.

First the Sumerian epic, **Gilgamesh**,

Twelve cuneiform tablets preserve most of what we have as the text of the Gilgamesh epic. Much of the content is what you might expect in a story about a mythic hero – his stature and strength:

Surpassing all kings, for his stature renowned

Heroic offspring of Uruk, a charging wild bull,

...

Mighty floodwall, protector of his troops,

Furious flood-wave, smashing walls of stone.⁹

He is going to confront another larger-than-life character, the wild Enkidu:

Shaggy with hair was his whole body ,

...

He knew neither people, not inhabited land.

He dressed as animals do.

He fed on grass with gazelles,

With beast he jostled at the waterhole.¹⁰

But swiftly, only 178 lines into the first tablet, things break out of the conventional pattern. Enkidu encounters his first human being, a prostitute, Shamhat, and after six days and seven nights of unabated sex with her becomes, what shall we say?;, more human.

Meanwhile, Gilgamesh is dreaming dreams and turns to his mother for interpretation:

Mother, I had a dream last night:

There were stars of heaven around me,

⁹ The Epic of Gilgamesh, (translated and edited by Benjamin Foster, Norton, New York, 2001) Tablet One, lines 30 ff.

¹⁰ Gilgamesh, Tablet One, lines 105 ff.

*Like the force of heaven something kept falling upon me!
I tried to carry it back but it was too strong for me,
I tried to move it but I could not budge it.*

...

*[I fell in love with it], like a woman I caressed it.
I carried it off and laid it down before you,
Then you were making it my partner.¹¹*

His mother knows full well what this means, even though she has not yet met Enkidu. She tells her son:

*The stars of heaven around you,
Like the force of heaven, what keeps falling upon you,
Your trying to move it but not being able to budge it,
Your laying it down before me,
Then my making it your partner,
Your falling in love with it, your caressing it like a woman,
Means there will come to you a strong one,
A companion who rescues a friend.
He will be mighty in the land, strength will be his,
Like the force of heaven so mighty will be his strength,
You will fall in love with him, and caress him like a woman.¹²*

After a second dream and dream interpretation, Gilgamesh accepts the prediction, which, of course, soon comes true:

¹¹ Gilgamesh Tablet One, lines 246 ff. The restoration "I fell in love with it" is secure, being based on his mother's response in line 268, and the phraseology of his second dream report, line 285.

¹² Gilgamesh Tablet One, lines 263 ff.

*“Let this befall according to the command of the great counselor Enlil.
I want a friend for my own counselor,
For my own counselor do I want a friend.”*

*Even while he was having his dreams
Shamhat was telling the dreams of Gilgamesh to Enkidu,
Each was drawn by love to the other.¹³*

The story transforms itself from the expected battle between the two larger-than-life figures into a story of their friendship and love, of their exploits together, and eventually of the anguish Gilgamesh suffers when the gods decree that Enkidu must die.

*Oh my friend, sweet wild donkey ,mountain onager, panther of the steppes!
O Enkidu my friend , swift wild donkey, mountain onager, panther of the steppes!
You who stood by me when we climbed the mountain,
Seized and slew the Bull of Heaven,
Felled Humbaba who [dwelt] in the forest of cedar,
What now is this sleep that has seized you?
Come back to me!¹⁴*

I know of nothing quite like this among oral epics. Some scholars would contend that we, nonetheless, have in these tablets a transcriptions, more or less exact, of a public

¹³ [Gilgamesh](#) Tablet One, lines 299 ff.

¹⁴ [Gilgamesh](#) Tablet VII, lines 47 – 55.

performance of a very exceptional bard. But it seems more likely to me that we have a writer's reshaping of an old story – doing what writing does best, letting us glimpse an authentic life, with motivations, beyond the conventional, and emotions of extreme intensity.

Before we try to resolve that matter, let's turn to the early Greek epics where we find something quite similar.

The Iliad: The Iliad surprises readers who approach it expecting the story of the Trojan War – the golden apple of the goddess of Strife, the judgment of Paris, the abduction of Helen, The Trojan Horse, Laocoon and his pitiful children strangled by the sea serpent, his warnings rejected, Troy burned and pillaged – all the favorite moments from Brad Pitt's Troy – none of this is in the Iliad. None. If you want the text that tells those stories, you have to turn to Vergil's Aeneid.

In the Iliad, as you know, the poem is about an emotion, an extreme, unbounded, destructive emotion. The very first word of the epic makes that clear:

*Rage –Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles,
Murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses,
Hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls,
Great fighters' souls, but made their bodies carrion,
Feast for the dogs and birds,
And the will of Zeus was moving towards its end.*

Iliad 1. 1 ff, trans. Fagles

The poem is about the cost of Achilles' rage, of his petulant withdrawal from battle, which is disaster for his comrades-in-arms, who need his prowess. Ultimately it costs the life of the friend he loves, Patroclus, who at the Greeks' darkest hour dons Achilles' armor, and for a while drives back the deluded Trojans. It doesn't work for long. The Trojan prince, Hector, closes in and kills Patroclus.

When a messenger brings the news to Achilles

A black cloud of grief came shrouding over Achilles

...

*Antilochus, kneeling near, weeping uncontrollably,
Clutched Achilles' hands as he wept his proud heart out –
For fear he would slash his throat with an iron blade..
Achilles suddenly loosed a terrible, wrenching cry*

Iliad 18 ca. 120, trans. Fagles

His mother, the sea nymph Thetis, hears that cry in the depths of the sea, and soon comes to console her son. We know what's coming – Achilles, armed in new armor, will now rejoin the war, with one thing in mind, killing the man who killed Patroclus. But neither we nor Achilles have in mind at this point what Thetis now tells him: that he is doomed to die immediately after Hector. If Achilles kills the murderer of the one who meant most to him, his own death will surely follow. This agonizing tragic choice does not deter Achilles, nor does the Iliad spend a great deal of time on it. The action moves on, predictably at first. Achilles kills Hector, and lets his rage know no restraint. He drags Hector's corpse around the city, degrading it as viciously as he possibly can. But then the unexpected happens. Hector's father, Priam, has the courage

to go to the Greek camp and begs Achilles for the release of his son's body. What is it that moves Achilles now? At one level, the will of Zeus. At the human level, something else. Priam ends his plea to Achilles by reminding him of his own father. And grief cuts through the rage of Achilles, who knows that his own death must soon follow that of Hector:

*Those words stirred within Achilles a deep desire
To grieve for his own father.
Iliad 24. 507, trans. Fagles*

The Odyssey:

This epic is very different in tone from the Iliad. It is full of folk tales, adventures at sea, sailors' yarns and crafty lies, sex with wondrous partners, and a long delayed nostos, a voyage home. It's also, as the Iliad turned out to be, a story about sons and fathers, in this case a son who more than anything else wants to find his missing father.

In many respect it's a fast paced adventure story, but at its core are intense emotion, and another extreme choice, – immortal life in the realm of a more-than-human woman, or a return to a very ordinary kingdom and a very mortal wife.

We first see Odysseus on the island of the nymph Calypso, sitting on a rock, homesick as a kid at summer camp, and crying. Crying! Not the conventional way to introduce an epic hero!

*[Calypso] found him there on the headland, sitting, still,
Weeping, his eyes never dry, his sweet life flowing away*

*With the tears he wept for his foiled journey home,
... In the night, true
He'd sleep with her in the arching cave – he had no choice—
Unwilling lover alongside lover all too willing,,
But all his days he'd sit on the rock and beaches,
Wrenching his heart with sobs and groans and anguish,
Gazing out over the barren sea through blinding tears.*

Homer Odyssey 5. 150 ff., trans. R. Fagles

But the complexity and intensity of Odysseus' emotions are still to be seen. It's when he finally returns to Ithaca, after all those years, that his pent up anger boils over in a scene of unexpected savagery. Of course he will kill the suitors who have been devouring his estate and trying to seduce his wife all the time he has been away. But he will not be satisfied with those deaths, nor let his son stop there. His rage boils out against the serving women of his house:

*March the women out of the great hall – between
The roundhouse and the courtyard's strong stockade –
And hack them with your sword, slashing out all their lives --
Blot out of their minds the joys of love they relished
under the suitors' bodies, rutting on the sly.*

Odyssey 22. 440 ff., trans. Fagles

What kind of man is this, who would give such orders to his son?¹⁵ What kind of poet is this who would drive the action of his poem so far, and even further, so far that finally the gods must intervene to put a stop to the killing? The critics run for

¹⁵ Telemachus doesn't actually follow his father's orders. He chooses death by hanging for the serving women.

cover; the ending is a mistake. But this is a hero who has lived on the edge for twenty years of war and desolation. What must we expect when warriors return home?

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These three texts, Gilgamesh, Iliad, Odyssey, unquestionably draw on oral story-telling and the techniques of oral heroic poetry but they reach to new levels of intensity. They do so, I suspect, because writing makes possible things that oral performance for all its delights and beauties cannot. The writer enjoys a freedom to search out the authentic even when it means going to the extreme. That requires, of course, a reader –not many are needed – who wants more than performance can provide, and will pause, ponder, re-read, let the text work its way.

But if I am wrong and the oral bards achieved all this and more, so much the better. The important point, the main thing I would have you take away from this lecture, is that in those remote and ancient times poetry was created, texts written, that with great cost and effort have been transmitted to us, and can, if we allow it, open our eyes to extremes of human experience. That requires, of course, not just writers of great power, but readers of great determination, readers who want more than entertainment, readers willing to read closely, repeatedly, intensely.

Part Two: Why literature now?

This kind of reading produces a special kind of pleasure, and, I believe, some important cognitive benefits as well.¹⁶ Let me go one step further, and suggest that “extreme literature” – writing of the sort we have just been discussing -- yields its greatest benefits when we find ourselves in extreme situations.

Let's begin, however, by thinking about literature in more familiar settings, trying to make our way in a world that constantly poses new challenges and requires smart adaptation. In this setting it's worth paying attention to what we might call the “collateral advantages” of studying literature.

These collateral advantages come in all sizes and shapes. No one wants them to displace the enriching experience of reading literature for its own sake. But it's important at this time, in a climate of fear and hostility, to pay attention to what we might otherwise dismiss as side-effects.

Most of us who have taught literature know how beneficial such study can be. We all, I imagine, have anecdotes about students who have become excited by literature, even the most demanding literature, have read intensely and written passionately about it. And we have seen that writing improve, the quality of arguments go up a notch, the understanding of the use –and abuse of language in other domains increase. These capacities are not luxuries; they are survival skills essential in a society where rapid, often unpredictable change is the norm. Without the ability to think critically, see through deceptive arguments and the abuses of language, and

¹⁶ G. Harpham, “The Next Big Thing in Literary Studies: Pleasure” in The Humanities and the Dream of America (Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 2011). See also Harpham's “In Praise of Pleasure” in the “On the Human” section of the web site of the National Humanities Center.

without the ability to use it properly, solve a problem, persuade others of what needs to be done –without all these you can find yourself in deep water with the sharks closing in.

So how does one develop those survival skills? The study of literature is not the only way, but evidence is emerging -- real evidence, not just anecdotes -- about how powerfully such studies can contribute to the cluster of abilities we group together as “critical thinking.” A new study by Richard Arum of NYU and his colleagues makes clear that they are developed better in the liberal arts and sciences than in more vocationally oriented fields.¹⁷ It’s a careful longitudinal study of students who took the Collegiate Learning Assessment in their first year, and again several years later. Arum and his colleagues have done all the necessary regressions and corrections in their data; their results have to be taken very seriously as an indication both of the contribution of the traditional liberal arts fields of the humanities, social and natural sciences, to the “survival skills” we have been discussing, and of the need for improvement across all fields and institutions.

Arum’s sample, he tells me, while fine for tracking the major divisions within academia, is not sufficient to differentiate among the effects of studying individual fields. But there is some evidence that the study of foreign languages and literature is an especially powerful way of developing critical

¹⁷ Richard Arum, Josipa Roksa and Esther Cho, [Improving Undergraduate Learning](http://highered.ssrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Improving-Undergraduate-Learning-2011.pdf) <http://highered.ssrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Improving-Undergraduate-Learning-2011.pdf>. Note especially fig 6 on p. 11.

thinking.¹⁸ And more evidence is on the way. Results from a study designed by Rachelle Brooks of Northwestern University , should be available later this year. With an advisory group of faculty from Classics and Political Science she has designed a cluster of discipline-specific questions, to determine growth in critical thinking over the course of an undergraduate education. My hunch is that it will show that Political Science helps some students make excellent progress in critical thinking; other students may achieve similar or greater benefits from a classical education, and enjoy the pleasures of reading some exceptionally pleasurable literature along the way. I will post the results of this study on my web site www.wrobertconnor.com as soon as they become available.

But in the meantime it is important to think about the factors that contribute to the growth of these capacities. It's not magic, but the result of certain expectations and practices. Two of your Indiana neighbors have helped identify these practices -- George Kuh of Indiana University and Charles Blaich of Wabash College's Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts.¹⁹ It's clear from their work that two very powerful practices are assigning (and promptly critiquing) long research papers, and foreign study. Students of literature and foreign languages are especially likely to encounter both of these --and benefit from them.

¹⁸ W. Robert Connor "Do Majors Matter?" Inside Higher Ed June 16, 2011: http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2011/06/16/connor_essay_on_why_majors_matter_in_how_much_college_students_learn

¹⁹ I have summarized and commented on their findings in "Let's Improve Student Learning. OK, But How?" Chronicle of Higher Education December 31, 2011, <http://chronicle.com/article/Lets-Improve-Learning-OK/130179/>

This evidence is emerging from the assessment movement. But there is another approach that I find exciting as well. For the past three year with a grant from the Teagle Foundation a group of literary scholars led by Michael Holquist at Yale have been working with neuroscientists, many based at the nearby Haskins abs, to see what happens in the brain when –and after – someone reads a complex text. (For the purpose of their study “complexity” is defined by the rate of surprise to perception in the text.) Michael Holquist tells me that “we posit that [the reading of complex texts] is conducive to habits that enhance our cognitive capabilities as they are brought to bear on other life tasks that offer challenges to habitual modes of perception. Crudely put, reading hard texts makes you smarter.”²⁰

That is a supposition, not as conclusion. The team, however, has begun testing it. Given the immense complexity of the seemingly simple act of reading and the challenge of designing experiments suitable for the fMRI magnets , it will take time to verify or refute it. But preliminary results have been submitted to a scientific journal and you can bet, I am sure, that the media will be eager to report them once they are published, and my web site will certainly link to them. Stay tuned.

Meaningful results in this area will take more time, and more funding. But we can glean a lot by careful observation of our own experience of literature –reading Proust for example, has

²⁰ Michael Holquist, personal communication, February 27th 2012.

Jonah Lehrer has shown in a fascinating book called Proust Was a Neuroscientist.²¹

You see where I am heading. Humanists ought to be in the forefront of efforts to understand what happens when someone reads complex, challenging, extreme texts. There are a lot of ways to do this, not all exclusively quantitative.²² The best evidence may come, for example, from samples of student writing, rigorously evaluated by rubrics developed not by psychometricians but in the first instance by faculty in language, literature and other humanistic fields.

From having watched for some years the efforts to improve liberal education my conclusion is that humanists should insist that student learning be at the top of the educational agenda, backed up by educationally valid means of assessing student learning. Hijack the assessment movement. Sleep with the Enemy. Beat the barbarians at their own game.

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But let's not lose sight of another kind of 'utility' in literary studies. I want to make one final comment about "extreme" literature and suggest that 'extreme' literature, in the sense I have been using the term, helps in extreme situations. Let me explain by mentioning something my friend Paul Woodruff, now a professor of Philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin, told me. He was drafted in the Vietnam War, lived through his tour of duty there. It could not have been easy; readjusting to civilian life wasn't easy either. When he came back he turned to Homer. He says, "I can attest to this: after

²¹ J. Lehrer Proust Was a Neuroscientist (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 2007).

²² The Association of American Colleges and Universities has done especially valuable work in showing how student portfolios can be designed and evaluated: <http://www.aacu.org/resources/assessment/portfolio.cfm>

my own shipwreck, tossed up on the shore of Princeton after Vietnam, it helped me enormously to read the *Odyssey* (3 times!) and think about how to write my own version of the nostos [Odysseus' return home.]“

Look where he turned. I suppose he read the histories of our involvement in Vietnam, and the policy discussions of how we can avoid such mistakes again. But when it came right down to it, he didn't turn to the nearby and easily comprehensible . He went for the extreme, a text chronologically and culturally remote, with situations off the scale we are familiar with.

I know, dimly at least, why he did that. While Paul was in the midst of it all in Vietnam, I was in a comfortable study in Princeton. But even there I felt ripped apart by the brutality and futility of that war, and turned to read and re-read, not Homer, but Thucydides, back and forth, over and over, trying to make sense of him and his war, *and* of us and our war, and, I guess, of myself.

In a bar on Fifty-Second Street in Manhattan W.H. Auden had turned in the same direction just as the Second World War broke out. In his poem, September 1, 1939, he wrote these inescapable lines:

*Exiled Thucydides knew
All that a speech can say
About Democracy,
And what dictators do,
The elderly rubbish they talk
To an apathetic grave;
Analysed all in his book,*

*The enlightenment driven away,
The habit-forming pain,
Mismanagement and grief:
We must suffer them all again.*²³

But it's not all out there, back then, in the trenches of some remote war in Asia or Afghanistan or somewhere. Joshua Cody has now published an extraordinary memoir called **[sic]**, a fearsome pun linking what he has written to the illness that almost took his life –not so much by eating away his body as by driving him close to suicide. He stood with a shard of razor sharp glass, the fragment of a coffee table he had smashed in his fear and rage, ready to slash it across his throat. What stopped him? He has written about that with an honesty that seems to me to catch the complexity and puzzlement of the moment as well as its sheer horror. Part of the answer, though, is Ezra Pound, in the Cantos, of course. But it was also the image of Pound captured by U.S. troops in Italy late in the Second World War, accused of treason, kept for weeks exposed to the elements in a 'gorilla cage,' driven mad by it perhaps, but driven to poetry as well. That helped. Yet Pound for Cody was just one part of something broader :

I held the edge of the glass against my neck...the edge of the shard of glass, which even under a microscope would appear as smooth and clean as the wall of a tsunami (p. 202)

How do we position suffering in human life This was the crucial question. It is one position, suffering. But it is not the only position,...

²³ W.H. Auden "September 1, 1939".

I am so glad I realized this ... The ironic moral to this story may well be that tucked away within and behind my madness was, in fact, the very 'humanistic,' old-school, unfashionable literary education bestowed on me by my parents, all that reading I'd done which I felt so guilty about and which on some level (again, the morphine delusion) I felt had somehow put me in the hospital, and for which on some level I'm afraid you, reader, will hate me...(pp. 202 -05)

It's a complicated story why Cody put down that glass shard and spared his own life. Maybe all we can say is that things sometimes work in amazing ways, when you are in extremis. But part of it, yes, of course, was Pound who converted his alienation, hatred, suffering, madness into poetry. The Cantos saved him. That can, and did, happen again.

It makes sense, doesn't it, that in extreme moments, when life is pitted against death, extreme literature is one place to turn. It's not the thriller, the page-turner, the best seller, the trendy favorite. It's the works of extreme emotions, extreme authenticity, even if also of extreme difficulty to which one can turn when, inevitably in a human life, the extreme moment comes.

You, here in Indiana, must know full well the story of how Indianapolis escaped burning:

“On the night of April 4th 1968 [Robert Kennedy] was due to speak to a mainly black community in Indianapolis. Before arriving at the ghetto he was told that Martin Luther King Jr. had been shot and killed earlier that day. He disregarded his advisers as they attempted to cancel the appearance and instead stood in front of the thousand or so people and without any notes spoke movingly about the murder of the man these people thought of as their own.

He began quietly his voice trembling but as he grew surer of his words his voice grew louder and stronger until he delivered what was to become one of his great speeches:

For those of you who are black and are tempted to be filled with hatred and distrust at the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I can only say that I feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man. But we all have to make an effort in the United States; we have to make an effort to understand, to go beyond these rather difficult times. My favorite poet was Aeschylus.

He wrote

***'In our sleep, pain which
cannot forget falls drop by
Drop upon the heart until,
in our own despair,
against our will,
comes wisdom through the awful Grace of God.'***²⁴

What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence or lawlessness; but love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward

²⁴ Aeschylus Agamemnon 179 –183, freely translated by Edith Hamilton.

those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or they be black.

So I shall ask you tonight to return home, to say a prayer for the family of Martin Luther King, that's true, but most importantly to say a prayer for our own country, which all of us love - a prayer for understanding and that compassion of which I spoke.

Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago:

To tame the savageness of man and to make gentle the life of this world.”²⁵

Robert Kennedy had carried those lines from ancient Greek writers with him, ever since his brother had been shot. They helped sustain him. They sunk in deep, so deep that he could quote them, as ancient Greeks would, not from a teleprompter, but from memory, from the heart. After his own assassination those words were inscribed on Robert Kennedy's gravestone in the Arlington National Cemetery:

“To tame the savageness of man and to make gentle the life of this world.”²⁶

²⁵ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 875, 1020 n.84. For Kennedy's encounter with Hamilton's text, cf. Schlesinger, 616-620, 988 nn. 56-60.

²⁶ This quotation is not, as often thought, from Aeschylus, but is a combination of a Delphic inscription of 125 B.C. with a passage in Dionysius of Halicarnassus' treatise of Thucydides, sec. 41. See J. Casazza "Taming the Savageness of Man": Robert Kennedy, Edith Hamilton, and Their Sources Taming the Savageness of Man": *The Classical World* 96, 2 (Winter, 2003), pp. 197-199.

That may be the best answer to our question “Why literature?”

W. Robert Connor