

The Singularity of Literature

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Creative reading

Otherness may be brought into the world, through the event of creation, in a number of fields: in writing, in scientific, mathematical, or philosophical thought, in political practice, and in painting or musical composition, to name just a few possibilities. It may also emerge, as I have already suggested, in responses to singular inventions in all of these fields. Among these responses is *reading*. It is only through the accumulation of individual acts of reading and responding, in fact, that large cultural shifts occur, as the inventiveness of a particular work is registered by more and more participants in a particular field.

Reading (and I include here listening to an utterance or mentally rehearsing a work known by heart) involves a number of different types of activity occurring simultaneously and not always in accord with one another. For purposes of analysis, we may isolate from these a basic reading procedure consisting of the mechanical conversion of typographic marks or phonetic sequences into conceptual structures, following the conventions of lexicography, syntax, genre, implicature, relevance, and so on. At the same time as it tries to decode the textual string with the necessary objectivity and accuracy, however, reading—and I am referring here to the reading of all kinds of text, not only those traditionally classified as literary—can be an attempt to respond to the otherness, inventiveness, and singularity of the work (three properties which, as we have seen, are closely inter-implicated). When it succeeds in apprehending otherness, in registering the singularity and inventiveness of the work, we may call a reading creative, by analogy with the other types of creativity noted earlier.¹

This is not to say that there are two distinct modes of reading; rather that the always dominant mode of mechanical reading can be modified or interrupted by a somewhat different relation to the work. Not all works will have something to offer to a reader's openness to alterity, of course, but when one does, mechanical and instrumental interpretation is complicated by what we may term readerly hospitality, a readiness to have one's purposes reshaped by the work to which one is responding. The work in question may be a philosophical argument, an autobiography, a poem, or any number of other types of text: in every case, its inventiveness, otherness, and singularity cannot be apprehended by means of the application of existing norms, or even by an extension of those norms. (By contrast, its originality, as a historical fact about it, can be appreciated in this way.)

A creative reading is not one that overrides the work's conventionally determined meanings in the name of imaginative freedom but rather one that, in its striving to do full justice to the work, is obliged to go beyond existing conventions. It is a reading that is not entirely programmed by the work and the context in which it is read, including the psychological character of the reader, even though it is a response to (not simply a result of or reaction to) text and context—and in this sense it might be called a necessarily unfaithful reading. (Later in this chapter we shall take up the question of the difference between the creative reading of literature and that of other kinds of work.)

Reading creatively in this way may be described in terms similar to those I have used in describing other modes of creation, including creative responsiveness to another person. To read creatively in an attempt to respond fully and responsibly to the alterity and singularity of the text is to work against the mind's tendency to assimilate the other to the same, attending to that which can barely be heard, registering what is unique about the shaping of language, thought, and feeling in this particular work. It involves a suspension of habits, a willingness to rethink old positions in order to apprehend the work's inaugural power. (It is this rethinking that will continue to have effects as one reads other works.) In its encounter with the other, an encounter in which existing modes of thought and evaluation falter, creative reading allows the work to take the mind (understood in the broadest sense) to the borders of its accustomed terrain. And there is no single "correct" reading, just as there is no single "correct" way for an artist, in creating a new work, to respond to the world in which he or she lives.

All reading is an event as much as it is an act—we feel pulled along by the work as we push ourselves through it, and we do not simply *choose* to read in a certain way—but the event of creative reading is marked by the experience of alterity that, as we have found, is extremely difficult to articulate. It requires a peculiar kind of passivity that does not preclude a high degree of alertness—what Wordsworth meant by “wise passiveness,” perhaps. And because reading happens as an event, there is no possibility of legislating in advance, as many critical theories have attempted to do, what is and is not relevant to a full response. We may want to exclude as illegitimate the author’s intentions, or facts of his or her biography, or our own beliefs as readers, or the quality of the paper on which the text is printed, but the reality is that any of these factors, and dozens more, may enter into a reading that does justice to the alterity and singularity of the work.

Since the subjective refashioning that the work calls for is different for every subject, indeed for every reading, singularity, too, is in play from the start. To respond to the singularity of the work I read is thus to *affirm* its singularity in my own singular response, open not just to the signifying potential of the words on the page but also to the specific time and place within which the reading occurs, the ungeneralizable relation between this work and this reader.² A word often used in literary commentary is “sympathy,” and while there is a danger that a term like this may seem to imply a simple matching between mind and work, it helpfully captures something of the positive openness that characterizes a fully responsive reading.

As I have already stressed, a created entity is not a simple material object but is constituted by norms or codes that, however new, can be at least partially deduced and duplicated, as well as inventively reformulated. Were this not the case, the object would simply remain opaque and uninterpretable. However, although no creation occurs without the operation of generalizable norms, it is only retrospectively that we can extract them as norms (and thus objectify the transition from the other to the same), and even this hypostatization remains revisable. An important part of a full response to a work that strikes me with the force of the new (and we should remember that this may be a work written centuries ago, or one I have read many times before) is thus an attempt to fathom its *modus operandi*, to achieve an accurate understanding of the repeatable rules according to which the work operates as a meaningful entity.³

If I succeed in fully specifying those rules, making it possible for me to imitate the work exactly, I will have converted it wholly from the other to the same; we can observe this happening at a cultural level when a work operates as a new formula for other works to follow but retains little inventiveness itself for later readers. In Chapter 3 we considered Surrey's invention of poulter's measure as a possible example of such total accommodation. To offer a reading, in the sense of a response that attempts to do justice to a work's singularity, is therefore both to explain what can be explained and to find a way of showing that even the fullest explanation does not exhaust the work's inventiveness, that this type of reading necessarily fails. The more convincing the explanation of the work, the more strongly its inexplicability and inexhaustibility as a work of literature emerge, and the more its singularity is affirmed.⁴

Another way of approaching the contrast between mechanical and creative reading is by considering the implications of the non-monolithic character of culture. There is no such thing as "a culture" in the sense of a homogeneous entity with clear and fixed boundaries; there are cultural assumptions, habits, practices, and products that can be grouped in constellations, but the groupings are internally disparate and flow into one another, can be divided into smaller groups or amalgamated into larger ones, and are subject to continual change. Each of us inhabits what I have been calling an *idioculture*, the deposit of our personal history as a participant in a number of ill-defined and often conflicting cultural fields, overlapping with or nested within one another. Any text we read—like any person we encounter—is the product of a unique cultural formation of this kind; the process of reading, therefore, is the process of subjecting the assumptions of the cultural fields that make up my own distinctive *idioculture* to those which the work embodies (not, of course, as the simple reflex of its time but as it is read in my own time). And the more fully I have absorbed the cultural materials that surround me—including those that make up the institution of literature (its history, its range, its linguistic and generic conventions)—the richer the encounter is likely to be.

In a response that is necessarily unique—for no other reader or reading could be constituted within the same cultural matrix—I will usually find both familiarity and alterity, both recognition and strangeness. But for a number of reasons this can never be a simple or repeatable procedure: both the work's and my cultural fields are

internally incoherent, some parts of the work's cultural fields may be inaccessible to me, and my own idioculture is in a permanent condition of change. Just as creation, the welcoming of the other, can occur only because the culture in which it occurs is constituted by exclusions and tensions, so creative reading can occur only because the reader's idioculture is fractured and pressured and thus open to alterity. To invert the statement with which the previous chapter ended, in a creative reading it is only as a singularity that I can respond to the singularity of the work.

Surprise and wonder

Creative reading, like any full response to alterity, is, as I have continually stressed, both active and passive. Focusing on the active aspect, I have talked of making an effort to do justice to the singularity of the other and to suspend habitual modes of thinking and feeling in order to be able to do this. Some kind of preparedness is necessary; without it, the work will be processed in terms of familiar norms and predispositions and received merely as a further example of the same. Yet it is also the case that to experience alterity as alterity, to register the singularity of the inventive work (like the singularity of the other person), is to be surprised by it, just as the inventor is surprised by the invention. There is no prescription that can be followed to ensure that alterity will emerge, no guarantee that a particular mode of reading will result in an experience of a work's inventiveness and singularity.

We cannot insist on logic, or chronology, here: I can welcome a work as other only if I have prepared for this possibility, and yet the event I have prepared for will occur only if it exceeds all my preparations and takes me unawares. In a passage in *The Master of Petersburg*, Coetzee's hero faces up to this failure of logic, as he acknowledges that the true surprise is one that cannot be foreseen, even as an anticipated surprise:

If he expects his son to come as a thief in the night, and listens only for the call of the thief, he will never see him. If he expects his son to speak in the voice of the unexpected, he will never hear him. As long as he expects what he does not expect, what he does not expect will not come. Therefore—paradox within paradox, darkness swaddled in darkness—he must answer to what he does not expect. (80)

Levinas's quarrel with the dominant tradition of Western philosophy and the educational methods it has spawned arises from his perception that they are dedicated to the mastery of otherness, leaving no room for surprise; whereas for him, true philosophical understanding, and true teaching and learning, can be achieved only in being surprised by the other. The difficulty which he never entirely overcomes, though it is the focus of much of his writing, lies in spelling out how it is that the subject can achieve an openness to surprise.

"Surprise" is itself, though a useful word in this context, not without problems. It denotes, here, the experience of a reordering of habitual modes of thought and emotion, an experience which arises from an encounter with an entity, an idea, a form, a feeling that cannot be accounted for, cannot even be registered, by those habitual modes. To be surprised by the work is already to have responded to it, before any conscious effort at understanding. But notwithstanding the usual connotations of the word, it need not happen suddenly or as a single event: it is more likely to be gradual, fitful, mixed with many other responses. (We observed something very similar in relation to the process of invention.) If I say *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* surprised me, I am probably not referring to a specific moment in my reading of Gibbon's massive history, but rather to one element in my protracted endeavor of coming to terms with the work—the historical arguments, the distinctive style, or some other feature or features. My first encounter with a work may make very little impact upon me at all: it may come across as nonsense, if it is in a completely unfamiliar mode (Mallarmé's "Un coup de dés," say, or Walter Abish's *Alphabetical Africa*), or as a mere repetition of a kind of writing with which I am all too familiar (Drayton's sonnets, perhaps, or Trollope's novels). Only with further readings, attentive to the work's singular fusion of generic and linguistic materials, does it register sufficiently as a literary work that blends familiarity and surprise.

There is a strong connection between surprise and *wonder*, and the latter word forms a useful complement to the former in our attempt to specify the singularity of a creative response to artworks, suggesting as it does a kind of lasting surprise—a paradox that is a feature of artistic invention. (Aristotle's term *thaumazein*, for him an important element in aesthetic pleasure, can in fact mean both surprise and wonder.⁵) Wonder is most closely associated with the tradition of the sublime in art and in nature (it is used by Longinus, for example), but can be

regarded as an ingredient in a full response to the inventiveness of any work of art. It follows from my earlier argument that what we wonder at in such a response is, in every sense, the *invention*: that which was invented and is now before us, the inferred act-event by means of which it was invented, and the inventiveness of the creator or creators which was, and remains, revealed therein. In the literary field, one component of the wonder inspired by the work is a sense of the power of words: how extraordinary that the language we use every day can be made to function with this precision, or this forcefulness, or this grace! Notwithstanding the long tradition of connecting art and nature when discussing sublimity, wonder as an aspect of creative reading is therefore quite distinct from wonder at natural objects.

A further point that must be stressed is that—though this may itself seem a surprising thing to say—the reader does not always recognize that an event of creative reading is taking place. My use of the word “surprise,” together with my frequent use of the word “experience,” is potentially misleading, as though reading creatively were to be understood entirely in psychological terms, something we register consciously as a mental and perhaps emotional sequence. Of course, as I have stressed, there is usually a psychological dimension to an encounter with alterity (though it may take a host of different forms), but the event itself is not necessarily one of which the subject is wholly aware.⁶ It may be a long time before the changes wrought by such an encounter make themselves felt—indeed, they may never reach consciousness. There is also the possibility that a work may be held in memory for a lengthy period without its potential for surprise being activated, before some other event triggers a new and creative engagement with it (just as there may be a delay before an inventive work has an effect on a culture).

It is worth stressing that the mere fact of a text’s changing the subject who reads it does not signal an inventive work and a creative reading. To take an obvious example, the advertising industry relies on the power of certain kinds of texts to change the behavior of readers. Advertisements often rely on surprise to achieve their effects, but they seldom involve the kind of inventiveness and singularity I have been discussing; that is, they seldom invite creative readings that will introduce into the culture the hitherto unthinkable. They are much more likely to reinforce existing tendencies in the culture, and if they challenge existing habits and expectations it is in order to encourage other habits

and expectations that will be more profitable for the advertiser. Although there are occasional exceptions, advertising, like some of what is classed as literature, cannot as a general rule risk the unpredictability of hospitality toward the other.

Surprise need not be opposed to the experience of recognition or intimacy discussed in the previous chapter: I can be surprised by the closeness of a work to me, the way it seems to echo what I had assumed to be my private thoughts, the fact that I experience familiarity where I expected to find only strangeness. We may feel that a work we are reading speaks directly to our deepest selves, yet when we look back we have to acknowledge that we had no awareness of those aspects of our subjectivity before the reading that offered itself as an affirmation of them. To apprehend the other is to acknowledge both an outer and an inner potentiality, while rendering that very distinction suspect.

Literary reading

So far in this chapter, I have been discussing the creative reading of a singular work without attempting to distinguish between the literary and the non-literary. But we may draw on our earlier discussions of the distinctiveness of literary invention and singularity to delineate the characteristics of literary reading. If I read a philosophical work creatively as philosophy, what I am responding to is the inventiveness, alterity, and singularity of the arguments and ideas embodied in language (and perhaps other sign systems); the same would be true of a work of economics, mathematics, or chemistry. A historical work or an autobiography may be read creatively as the representation of persons, events, and objects, inventively described and related to one another. The importance of John Rawls's *Theory of Justice* or Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, for example, lies in the number of inventive readings—in both senses—these books have received, issuing in influential teaching, further publications, and political action. To the extent, however, that I am responding to the words in which these arguments and representations are couched, in their singular and inventive arrangement, my creative reading partakes of the literary.

To respond fully to a work that presents itself as literary one has to be embedded in the culture of which literature, and perhaps this

literary form, is a part, and one has to deploy one's familiarity with the conventionalized routines of the literary institution. A great deal of patient labor is unavoidable if a responsible reading is to be achieved; but it represents only the foundation of such a reading.⁷ It brings the work into the orbit of the same; it treats it as an object whose configurations can be objectively studied and reported on.

The more fully this procedure is carried out on a work, the more clearly a unique object stands out, different from every other work. (We saw the beginnings of such a procedure in discussing Blake's "Sick Rose" in Chapter 5.) However, its uniqueness in this sense consists solely in a particular configuration of a large number of coded elements—word-meanings, grammatical categories, dates, places, reported events, allusions to other works, rhythmic features, and echoes of sound, to name only a few. It remains fully within the same; it makes no demand on habitual frameworks; it requires no judgment. The same type of analysis could in principle be carried out on any text of any kind, and it would emerge as unique, just as each snowflake is said to be unique. When a reading of a work is *literary*, it is more than a response to its particular collocation of coded elements; it is a response to a singularity that cannot be analyzed, yet remains recognizable across all repetitions of reading.

My depiction of the act of reading a literary work is still misleading in one important respect: I have been talking as if the work were a pre-existing object to which the reader, wholly independent of it, responds, whereas it is in fact a set of coded signals which become a poem or a novel only in a specific reading, and within which the reader too comes into being (as a singular subject partly produced in the reading of the work). Reading a work therefore makes it happen, "enacts" it in a way which is ambiguous—like the word "act"—as to its initiatory and mimetic functions. More specifically, a reading is a performance of the singularity and otherness of the writing that constitutes the work as it comes into being for a particular reader in a particular context. We shall return to the question of response later in this chapter and the question of performance in Chapter 7.

Re-reading

In his sonnet “On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again,” Keats bids farewell to “golden-tongued Romance” and turns to a different mode of reading:

Adieu! for, once again, the fierce dispute
Betwixt damnation and impassion'd clay
Must I burn through; once more humbly assay
The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearian fruit.

The account I have given of the literary event may seem to allow for no explanation of the phenomenon Keats is addressing: that the repetition of a reading experience can be as powerful as, or even more powerful than, the initial reading experience. We are all familiar with the feeling of enriched understanding and heightened intensity in re-reading a work, and we have probably all said after finishing a particularly inventive work of literature: “I need to read that again.” One aspect of this phenomenon is, of course, that a work being re-read is very different from a work being read for the first time: the knowledge of what is to come in a work one has read before and the memory of the experience of earlier readings transform the reader’s experience. However, re-reading can continue to offer fresh rewards well beyond a second or third occasion, when one might expect these factors to be relatively insignificant.

How this happens can be understood by returning to our discussion of a culture’s response to an inventive work or *oeuvre*, both in its time and later. Just as a body of work can change expectations to the degree that it begins to be less inventive in relation to its audience (Wordsworth’s “I wandered lonely as a cloud” has never been as inventive as when it first appeared), so a work that has a strong effect the first time it is read can have a reduced impact thereafter. But the reverse is often the case. However familiar the work is to me (and familiarity is, of course, part of the pleasure of much re-reading, though it is a peculiarly literary pleasure), it can always strike me with the force of novelty if, by means of a creative reading that strives to respond fully to the singularity of the work in a new time and place, I open myself to its potential challenge. Exact repetition never occurs, since the reader, and the cultural context in which and by means of which the reading

takes place, constantly change. Every reading of a literary work that does justice to its singularity is itself an irreducibly singular event.

This explains the phenomenon of repeated suspense: knowing how a fictional narrative ends need not diminish the experience of increasing tension during the reading. Far from being the result of complete immersion in the events being related, so that we forget we are in a fictional world and respond as if to reality, this characteristic of literature springs from the fact that we remain well aware of the fabricated (and authored) nature of what we read. The suspense that is created, when it is literary suspense and not simply a response to events represented in language, does not depend on ignorance of what will happen but on the process of tension-making that the reader is taken through in full cognizance of what is happening. Suspense is staged, performed for and by the reader, whether it is the first or fifteenth encounter with the work. It is much harder for the historian to create suspense when the outcome of the events being described is well known; indeed, he or she is very likely to use literary devices to achieve this end.

The inventiveness of a literary work can, in part, be measured by its capacity to be re-read without loss of power; an uninventive work simply confirms my predispositions and expectations each time I read it. The effect of re-reading also offers a way of distinguishing between literary and non-literary works. In responding to the inventiveness of a non-literary work (or the non-literary inventiveness of a work that is also literary), there is no point in returning once I have registered the point of its new formulations. Re-reading the work simply repeats the process, and is only worth doing if I fail to grasp the work's argument, or I forget what I had gleaned the first time round. Re-reading the literary work, by contrast, is an affirmation of its literariness.

Reading as response

There is nothing new in the idea that a reading of a work of literature is a response to its uniqueness. Among literary criticism's watchwords have been for many decades the cluster "respond," "response," "responsiveness": students of literature in the most traditional classrooms are taught, usually via the medium of other people's responses, to respond fully and sensitively—that is, with appropriate responsiveness—to

literary works. We might think of I. A. Richards's influential campaign against "stock responses": pre-formed views and emotions associated with particular phenomena, triggered by certain words and phrases and thus inhibiting full engagement with the work.⁸ A list of all the adjectives used with "response" as laudatory in this context would bring out the range of the term's applications; they include "full," "adequate," "accurate," "appropriate," "true," "legitimate," "fitting," "just," "apt."

The notions of response and responsiveness are, however, more problematic than has usually been acknowledged. When, in a pedagogic mode derived from New Criticism (and which is still the norm in high schools and probably in undergraduate classes as well), students are taught to respond sensitively and fully to a literary work, they are expected to detect the unique and permanent significance of the work in question (or what the teacher, representing a cultural tradition, takes this significance to be). At the same time, there is also an insistence on responsiveness as a mark of the individual *reader's* unique identity; students of literature are encouraged to develop their "own" responses, and censured if they merely reduplicate someone else's response. A student handing in an essay that largely repeated an existing critical work would not expect high praise, no matter how accurately it represented what was held to be the work's essence.

These two demands are obviously in conflict, but both are imperative: to relax one would be to encourage willful subjectivism, to relax the other would foster mechanical plagiarism. To create an answering work that is itself unique is, it seems, the most adequate way of responding to the uniqueness of the work being read. That the most widespread classroom practice in literary studies is built upon a paradox is not a mark against it (though it can be censured for its failure to acknowledge and account for the paradox); rather, it is an indication of the complexity of the notion of response. How does the response relate to the work it follows? It must, clearly, be different from it: a response is not an echo or a reflection; it has no value if it is entirely programmed by the text. And yet to *be* a response and not an arbitrary event that happens to come after the work it must in some way repeat the work. Furthermore, what it must repeat in its avoidance of repetition is not just any element of the work, but the very thing that makes it unique—otherwise it will not be a response to that particular work, and hence not a response at all, merely a reaction.

It is not a matter of an act calling forth a wholly secondary and subsidiary reaction, then, but of a *reenactment* that, paradoxically, makes the “original” act happen, and happen differently with each such response. What is more, the text as text, as unique literary work, achieves its full existence only in my reading of it, and what I am calling “my response” is to something that is constituted in that response. Just as my response to another person as other is a response to the other in its relating to me, so my response to a work is not to the work “itself” but to the work as other in *the event of its coming into being in my reading*. As with many other nouns in this book, a clumsier but strictly preferable term would be “responding,” as there is no entity and no closure involved, only a repeatable, though always different, happening.

We can now reinterpret the impossible demand for a response that is both faithful and original. The uniqueness to which the response must do justice is not an unchanging essence, nor the sum of the work’s difference from all other works as it appears in a particular time and place, but the inventive otherness of the work as it emerges through my creative act of comprehension (and my acknowledgment of its limits), that is to say, its *singularity*. The only way I can affirm and sustain the singularity of the work is by a singular response, since my response grows out of the particular act of reading. It will be a response that takes account of all the programmable procedures that the institution of literature requires in a full account of its formal arrangements of meaning and referentiality (and to this degree it will be part of the general practice of criticism). But my response will also be an unpredictable, singular affirmation of the singular event of the work’s otherness as it impinges on me, here and now, in this event of reading. (We may recall Kant’s distinction between “imitating” and “following” a work of genius—see Chapter 3 above.) I will be responding not only as a cultural representative but as a singularity not exhausted by my culture’s determinations. And since what I respond to creatively is brought into being by my response, there can be no simple separation or chronology here: a creative reading displaces the opposition of inside and outside, before and after. It can do this only as an event which is also the experience of an event.

Literary works themselves have been among the most notable examples of the creative response to singularity—sometimes in the guise of imitations, translations, or extrapolations (examples might include Pound’s *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and*

Guildenstern Are Dead, Coetzee's *Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg*), and always with the "unfaithfulness" of which I have spoken. All good translations operate in this manner, too. What is more, there is no possibility of classifying critical responses into "creative" or "mechanical" with any kind of objectivity or finality: a creative response to a literary work can be identified only in a further response to *its* singularity—only, that is, when it functions inventively.

Reading as invention

A creative reading often moves to an articulation in words, as if the work being read demanded a new work in response.⁹ Coetzee explains his need to write about Kafka as follows:

My experience is that it is not reading that takes me into the last twist of the burrow, but writing. No intensity of reading that I can imagine would succeed in guiding me through Kafka's word-labyrinth: to do that I would once again have to take up the pen and, step by step, write my way after him. (*Doubling the Point*, 199)

A verbal articulation of this kind—in a conversation, an article, a lecture, a letter—may itself function inventively to make possible, through singular responses by other readers, new ways of writing, new ways of reading. An inventive reading (and now "reading" takes on its meaning of "commentary") is, of course, subject to all the conditions under which invention functions, including both the necessity of close engagement with the cultural context and the effects of historical shifts.

In fact, this process—the inventive work giving rise to the inventive response—is how *all* invention occurs. For invention is never a matter of creation *ex nihilo*; it is always, as I have been arguing throughout this book, a response. Putting it generally, it is a response to a cultural situation in which the pressures and fractures inherited from the past make possible the emergence of what has been suppressed or disguised; but this cultural situation is manifested in particular inventive works (we are talking for the moment of all kinds of cultural products), and it is in response to these works that fresh inventions arise. The inventive literary writer may not be aware of all (or indeed any) of the works to which he

or she is responding, but this is not to be wondered at: we have already noted how little the inventor may understand of the process of invention.

In an inventive response the reader attempts to answer to the work's shaping of language by a new shaping of his or her own (which will in turn invite further responses)—whether it be in the form of a literal act of writing, an inward composition, a speech or intervention in a discussion, a change of behavior. What this means, of course, is that it in turn will partake of the literary to some degree, and demand of its readers a response of the same inventive kind. This prospect of an endless chain of responses may sound alarming, but it only becomes so if we conceive of literature as possessing an extractable content which can finally be isolated—and hence possessing those qualities of self-presence, universality, historical transcendence, and absolute signification on which the Platonic tradition of aesthetics is based. But literature is characterized precisely by its lack of any such content—which, of course, is why we re-read, with no end in sight of our re-readings.

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