
Forum

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The Reality of Literary Studies

To the Editor:

I cannot help thinking that Patricia Meyer Spacks's contention ("Reality—Our Subject and Discipline," 110 [1995]: 350–57) that the worth of professing literature lies in the rewards of understanding and teaching "rich and baffling texts and intertextuality" (356) does not leave the study of literature free from the incursions of the skeptical "So what?" Nor do I believe it is the "skeptical public" alone that "think[s] claims of ambiguity and complexity and multiplicity so many evasions of responsibility" (352). The heritage of world literature is indeed a dismal affair if it amounts to little more than preventing readers from being "automatically scared to untangle intricacy, in their immediate experience or, for instance, in the conflicting appeals and promises of politicians" (353). In a period when talk of value is regarded as heretical, if not blithely autocratic, what is wanted for literature clearly is an assertion of value that foregrounds the distinctive status of the literary object.

The desire for such an assertion of value is made clear by the mere existence of Spacks's address and, for example, of Peter Brooks's recent essay "Aesthetics and Ideology: What Happened to Poetics?" (*Critical Inquiry* 20 [1994]: 509–23). In both cases, it is literature's value as a rhetorically complex object that is seen to justify its study. However, this seems to me a contestable justification. If one learns to appreciate rhetoric ("complexity") through the study of literature, why can't such an appreciation also be won through the study of any number of generically disparate discourses that are not necessarily literary? I should think the study of mathematics, of the classics, of law, and of a host of other disciplines leads equally to the strengthening of sensitivity to complexity. The question remains, even after all this talk about complexity, What purpose *literature*? Or, as Spacks offers, "So what?"

If the need to establish a distinctive value for the literary object is ultimately a reaction against the historicist tendency to level the discursive playing field (and the historicist method is of course tantamount to the method of cultural studies), would it not be a more fruitful project to critique historicism's politics—its endless deconstruction of all authority but its own philosophically and morally empty skepticism? It is in the aftermath of such critique or, better, in anticipation of it that the assertion of literature's distinctive value needs to be made.

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