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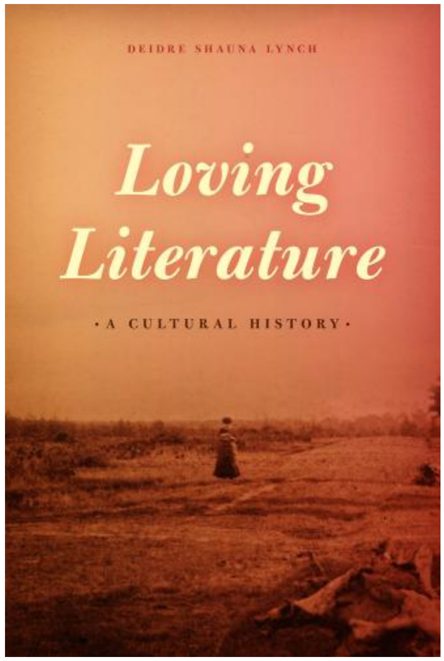

ON LOVING LITERATURE

Book Review by **William Giraldi**

First, a distinction. When I employ the term *academic* in what follows, I will not mean the first definition, the technical one: individuals who teach college students. I will mean the second definition, the sullied one: individuals for whom the academy is not a place to work but a way to think, those priests and priestesses of palaver for whom literature is never quite okay as it is, and to whom literature begs to be gussied up in silkier robes. These are politicizers who marshal literature in the name of an ideological agenda, who deface great books and rather prefer bad books because they bolster grievances born of their epidermis or gender or sexuality, or of the nation's economy, or of cultural history, or of whatever manner of apprehension is currently in vogue. You might think of the distinction as one between those for whom the academy is a meaningful paycheck and those for whom it is a meaningless principle—teaching at a university does not ipso facto transform one into an academic. The distinction remains a crucial one, a distinction defined by much more than mere differences, because there are thousands inside the academy whose souls have not been spoiled by it—untold English professors who can write with clarity and speak with passion, who don't conflate art with personal identity, or aesthetics with politics, and who every semester impart their love of beauty and wisdom to students savagely in need of it.

Now, let's talk about love. Deidre Shauna Lynch, the Chancellor Jackman Professor of English at the University of Toronto, has just published a book titled *Loving Literature: A Cultural History*. To canvass the history of this concept called literary love, the book winds its tortured and tortuous way through that important British cultural chunk between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. Lynch wishes to uncover "how it has come to be that those of us for whom English is a line of *work* are also called upon to *love* literature and to ensure that others do so too." Except I'm not certain that anyone is really calling upon academics to love the subject they study—the point is that they seem categorically incapable of such love, and so they are being pitied for so ardently missing the point of literature. For Lynch, it's unfortunate that we have "this tendency to identify literary studies with the love of the subject and to identify that love with amateurs not yet subjected to the affective deformation that supposedly comes with formal education." She uses "amateur" in the literal sense and not the derogatory one, and by the awkward phrase "affective deformation" she means, I think, theory's habit of grabbing hold of students and smacking from their pretty hearts their love for the beauty and wisdom of literature.

Lynch dislikes that academics "must make their peace with the fact that viewed from the outside their work does not look like work," but this again misses how academics are perceived by those sensible enough to dwell outside their ranks: The problem is precisely that their work looks *too much like work*—onerous, meticulous, pointless, jargon-soaked work without application either to literature or to living. "My experience," writes Lynch, "does not suggest to me that the personal is repressed when departments of English go about their ostensibly clinical official business." Very glad to have her word that her own experience refutes our perception of English departments—although that term "suggest" seems rather unsure of itself, does it not?—but the rest of us have had our own experiences of reading what those English departments produce. We have the fruits of those experiences, and the fruits are rotten: unreadable prose and classes with incomprehensible names. Also:

Think twice about any writer who doesn't mind using the term "business" when referring to "literature." (Lynch's previous book has the mind-warping title *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning.*)

Seemingly displeased with the conception of literature as having the rare ability to enlarge our understanding of ourselves and others, Lynch has this to say: "We don't treat literature as a thing but as a person: lovers of literature construct the aesthetic relation as though it put them in the presence of other people and with the understanding that the ethical relations so conjured must not be instrumentalized." Good luck parsing whatever that last part is supposed to mean, but clearly she prefers to treat literature as a "thing" and not as a "person," and one wishes that academics would do just that, because it would be an immense improvement over what they actually do, which is to treat literature neither as a thing nor a person but rather as a frog splayed and pinned to a table. They then dispose of the frog's innards and insert a tract for their own ideological purposes, a tract that has little or nothing to do with how that poor frog croaked its song in life.

Here is Lynch's version of the always-modish platitude that says love is complicated: "[T]he phrase 'the love of literature' gets used as though its meaning were transparent and as if the structure of feeling that it designated were wholly healthy and happy. It is as though those on the side of the love of literature had forgotten what literary texts themselves say about love's edginess and complexities." Never mind what she could possibly mean by "the structure of feeling," and never mind, too, that love is edgy and complex only for those unwilling to give wholly and freely of themselves; instead beware of anyone who refers to imaginative literature as a "text," because before long she'll be referring to you, dear reader, as an "organism."

If you're looking to trace the more recent history of how the English department came to be known as a bastion of muddled thinking, you might begin with those two paladins of post-structuralist theory, Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man. Their deconstructionist shenanigans, their absurd and absurdist skepticism, posited that language doesn't really mean what it says, that language must always be a puzzle pointing to other puzzles. The real puzzle was how anyone could have erected a theory upon a void, a theory that chose to ignore what lay on the page and focus instead on what wasn't there. To deconstruct was to be deluded and then call those delusions conclusions. (Remembering Elias Canetti's useful phrase "the smashers of language," I've always thought that a better term to describe deconstruction would have been "pro-destruction.") Theirs was a crusade to demonstrate the essential vacuity of sentences, but of course the only vacuity to be found was in their own obscurantist pages, language that assaulted everything you knew and admired about words. Deconstruction began as a breed of nihilism born of cultural despair and, it must be said, pure silliness, an inability to appreciate the aesthetic beauty and intimations of wisdom all good books have to offer.

No one, I hope, will dispute that language has its inadequacies, its organic shortcomings, but to have built tedious theories upon its wholesale contamination was to show how quickly casuistry leads to calamity. Derrida's and de Man's cynical rhetoric against meaning, against the significant struggle every good writer goes through in order to arrive at *le mot juste*, had a calamitous effect in English departments across the land from the 1970s to the 1990s. You could have spotted those darkening skies in the 1960s, the political perversion of literature in outfits such as the Modern Language Association (MLA)—Edmund Wilson tussled with the MLA in 1968 over their "unreadable articles"—and as far back as the 1930s and 1940s you could have found critics such as R. P. Blackmur and René Wellek warning against the folly of employing literature for ulterior purposes.

Derrida's and de Man's was a vampiric campaign that sucked the lifeblood and beauty out of great books, and the damage from that campaign can still be seen today every time some tenure-track hopeful utters the word "iterability." (You can always reply to that word with Percy Bysshe Shelley's line from "A Defence of Poetry": Literature "creates anew the universe, after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration.") Show me someone who can no longer recognize beauty and I'll show you someone who has lost his faith not only in writing and reading and loving but in living, too.

In his 1991 essay "The Academic Zoo," Joseph Epstein commented that "the contemporary university is a place of deep conformity, despite its … appearance of being an Elysian Field in which the spirit is allowed to roam freely." And in his 1954 comic novel of the academy, *Pictures from an Institution*, Randall Jarrell got it right with a typically Jarrellian epigram: "The really damned not only like Hell, they feel loyal to it." Part of that loyalty is a self-satisfied devotion to writing badly. Epstein speaks of "the vast amounts of hideous prose required to do the job" of the academic, and this is why it remains nonsensical to read academics on the topic of loving literature: not only because their mission is to usurp and debase great books, but because the thing that is lovable about literature is the very thing they are incapable of approximating, never mind replicating.

How can one say with any surety that academics don't sufficiently love literature, and why, per Lynch's inquiry, does love even matter in literature? Nobody can tell for certain what moves in another's heart, but any engaged reader can tell exactly what's on the page, and the reason academics are indicted for having no love for literature is because their prose is incapable of giving pleasure. Pleasure is the test, not only for literature but for criticism too—pleasure en route to wisdom. Criticism that does not attempt creativity, that does not aspire to meet imaginative literature on equal footing in the manner of Walter Pater or Oscar Wilde, will fail both to register now and to be remembered later. In forsaking pleasure taken and pleasure given, academics have forsaken much indeed, including any claims they might make on love. They will never admit to taking no pleasure in literature, but don't bother about that. The evidence is right there on the page—it always is.

And as for why love should matter in the first place: When *shouldn't* love matter? Lynch wants us to question our affection for the literature we love because she believes—so hard to tell in sentences you have to read twice even though it hurt quite enough to read them once—that affection can lead to deception, that love can disarm our critical faculty. She'd be right about that—witness the Harry Potter scrum—except that some critical faculties need all the disarming they can get. And the love we're speaking of here is not a sentimental and uncritical affection for a particular author but a wider understanding and valuing of literature's central place in our inner lives. Remember, too, the Socratic assertion that says excellence in love is a species of knowledge.

In a 1911 lecture at the University of Cambridge, A. E. Housman remarked that "the aim of literature is the production of pleasure," and of course his conception of pleasure included not only aesthetic pleasure but the pleasure that derives from useful intimations of wisdom, from knowing ourselves and others a minim better than we did before sitting down with a novel or poem or play. (In that same lecture he also made sure to say that "large departments of literature are also departments of lying.") With those words, Housman was paying homage to the Horatian prescription for literature, *dulce et utile*: sweet and useful. John Dryden believed the same: "Poesy only instructs as it delights." For Horace as for Dryden, *dulce* without *utile* rendered literature impotent, and this prescription became codified throughout the Renaissance and endured mostly in good health until the contagion of French theory infected American academics in the middle of the twentieth century.

All English professors, alas, are not created equal. To have studied under Lionel Trilling or F. R. Leavis is not identical to having studied under an obscurantist, deconstructionist academic who believes in his middling spirit and mind that, say, Homer is harmful to the morale of those who proudly make a profession of being offended. Trilling crafted incisive, agile, memorable sentences that corresponded perfectly to the undulations and contours of his thinking. And while it's true that in England Leavis exerted a mafioso's control over English departments, marshaling literature to perform an ethical scrutiny—tell him what books you love and he'll tell you your moral coordinates—it's also true that his insights, relayed in that donnishly charismatic prose, are capable of increasing our pleasure in and understanding of novels and poems. Derrida and de Man, meanwhile, are capable only of pleasure-death through their glutinous obfuscations in prose so clotted with plaque it practically begs for a blood thinner.

You know that your spouse loves you because he or she demonstrates that love in deeds. And sentences are a writer's deeds. To call a prose "academic" is one of the worst defamations you can possibly inflict upon it. And if you believe, as you should, that how one writes is the most accurate indication of how one thinks—"Writing is thinking in slow motion," said Walter Kaufmann—then not only are academics not worth reading, but they are also not worth listening to in the lecture hall. Here's Aldous Huxley writing on a bit of academic folderol he found in a textbook: "It is not only aesthetically disgusting; it is also completely untrue." And there you have the Keatsian beauty/truth duet and also the reason all those postmodern theories of literature will never be valid—they're ugly.

Lynch's academic sentences are not the most egregious you can find. They don't quite sink to the inky depths of de Man or Derrida or their American progeny, all of whom call to mind William Hazlitt's immortal barb against Jeremy Bentham: "His works have been translated into French—they ought to be translated into English." Her prose relaxes, unknots itself slightly when considering Samuel Johnson's contribution to this concept of literary love—those passages can be read without pain.

But all too often you'll be assailed by such shibboleths as *historicize, canonicity, disciplinization, relationality, individuated, aggressivity, supererogatory, ethicalization,* and *verticality* before you are mugged by talk of *affective labor, gendered schema, sociably minded animism, the rhetorical orientation of a socially responsive and practical pedagogy, historical phenomenology of literariness, associationist psychology, hermeneutic procedures, the autonominization of art, an idiolect of personal affection, the hierarchy of munificent genius,* and *textual transactions,* and then you'll be insulted by such quotidian clichés as *speak volumes*, *love-hate relationship*, *the long haul, short shrift, mixed feelings,* and *playing dumb.*

Why the needless redundancy "binding together"? Have you ever tried to bind something *apart*? And why, pray tell, are academics so fond of using "evidence" as a verb? ("It does not communicate, but evidences the incommunicable.") Do they also use a brick as a hammer when the hammer is at hand? Of the new, more personal reading practices that emerged in the eighteenth century, Lynch writes, "What literature isn't, is something to be used," and first you'll scratch your head at the existence of that comma and then scratch it again when you wonder what possibly could have prevented her from simply writing, "Literature can't be used."

Early in her study, Lynch pauses to castigate David Denby's *Great Books: My Adventures with Homer, Rousseau, Woolf, and Other Indestructible Writers of the Western World* (1996), about how in the center of his life Denby returned to Columbia University to test ride two freshman humanities courses. Lynch is irked that Denby "turns to denouncing the joylessness of the academic left"—he calls them "dry-souled clerics" deficient in literary love—and then dismisses Denby's telling of his experience as a "caricature." You will recall how Lynch asked us to trust her own experience in the labs of English departments, and yet she sees nothing wrong with dismissing Denby's experience of what those labs have cooked up. Personal experience, like eyewitness testimony, is usually the fastest way to a false verdict, and so you must judge the teller, the one who's dispatching from the trenches, and you must judge the telling, the manner in which that dispatch is delivered. Denby's book you want to remember having read; Lynch's book you can't remember why you're reading.

Literature will not be harnessed for any cause, no matter how an academic distorts it, and literature that harnesses itself in the service of a cause is not literature at all but agitprop. If you agree that literature is, in Kenneth Burke's words, "equipment for living," a necessary asking of the right questions, and if you don't question your own love of living, your own love of children and nature, of justice and language and storytelling, then why would you question your love of the best expression and assertion of that love? Denby speaks of literature's "special character of solitude and rapture," and that's accurate enough, but let's leave the last word for Marcel Proust: "Real life, at last enlightened and revealed, the only life fully lived, is literature."

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