

9-18-2016

Literature Is Everything

Ronald R. Thomas

University of Puget Sound, rrt@pugetsound.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/faculty_pubs

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Citation

Thomas, Ronald R. *Literature Is Everything*. University of Puget Sound, 2016.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at Sound Ideas. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Sound Ideas. For more information, please contact soundideas@pugetsound.edu.

Literature Is Everything

Ronald R. Thomas

Literary critics are often accused of trying to treat everything as literature--of not properly acknowledging the difference between art and reality, between fiction and fact, between reading and living. I am reminded of that charge as I offer an account of this collection of books from my personal library. At about three hundred titles, the selections in it represent less than ten percent of my entire library, but they make up an important fragment of the whole. The choices behind any curated collection like this tell a story about the collector, even if not the whole story—offering a kind of map or X-ray of the intellectual constituents and pathways of my critical and creative imagination.

Rather than taking up the argument that “everything is literature” in accounting for the choices that comprise this collection, I offer the complementary and equally provocative proposition that “literature is everything.” This is a very different claim. I take the phrase from Sartre, whose work impressed me so deeply the first time I read his book *What Is Literature?* as an undergraduate in the late 1960s. “What is the literature of an epoch but the epoch appropriated by literature?” Sartre asked. “If literature is not everything,” he reasoned, “it is worth nothing.” If literature is to be anything other than escapist entertainment or mere propaganda, that is, if it is able to enlighten and liberate us in any measure from the limits of our particular historical conditions and allow us to imagine something else, it must embrace, confront, and even resist those conditions.

While my understanding of what it means for literature to “appropriate” its epoch has changed over the years, my conviction about the kind of engagement this principle demands between the art of writing and the responsibilities of living has not wavered. It has consistently guided my career as a scholar, a teacher, a writer, and a college president, and it informs the choices I have made to create this collection.

My scholarly work has focused on “the long nineteenth century,” the period stretching from the Victorian Age through Modernity. This was a period of big ideas, of “theories of everything.” It was when Darwin interpreted the history of the world through the theory of evolution and the attendant principles of adaptation and survival of the fittest. Marx conceived of history as driven by power and money, a Hegelian dialectic manifested in a class struggle that would eventually lead to a classless and stateless society. Freud interpreted everything as another kind of struggle—between “civilization and its discontents,” between the dark forces of the libidinal unconscious and the repression and censorship of consciousness. Each of these nineteenth century theories, along with others, was, in effect, an epic fable about everything. My interest lies in exploring how those grand stories interacted with and were anticipated, foreshadowed, desired, appropriated, and critiqued by imaginative literature—especially by the novel, the big literary form of story-telling that reached its peak in this period as well.

In addition to classic texts of literary criticism and theory that shaped my training as a literary critic, then, this collection contains a number of titles by people who shaped nineteenth-century thought, like Freud. His significant presence is the result of an interest sparked by my eternal fascination with dreams and fueled by the strange prevalence of dream accounts in so many Victorian novels. That pairing led me to read a lot of Freud when I was in

graduate school. I am not a Freudian in my thinking and hold little confidence in psychoanalysis as a science or a therapy. But Freud took seriously these crazy tales that are visited upon us every night—however distorted they may be—and theorized that they were indeed significant. Not as divine communications or hauntings from beyond, but as psychic symptoms from within: they were messages to ourselves, emanating from what he called our unconscious and succeeded in escaping the “censorship” of consciousness only by taking on a distorted, fragmented form in the moments when we are waking. The confused manifest expression of our dreams often disguised a more powerful and coherent “latent” content, he maintained. Every dream is a disguised wish, “the royal road” to our unconscious, a story about ourselves waiting to be told.

Why, I wondered, in his magnum opus *The Interpretation of Dreams* did Freud invoke so many nineteenth-century novels in explaining his theory? And why were there so many dreams explained so elaborately in so many nineteenth-century novels—often in terms resembling Freud’s, even before he was born? Responding to questions like these formed the seeds of my first book: *Dreams of Authority: Freud and the Fictions of the Unconscious*.

There are several books on the history of criminology in the collection, too. My interest in this area was generated by the tangled relationship I noticed between the emergence of the wildly popular new genre of Victorian detective fiction at the same time as the creation of the modern police force and the subsequent invention of the disciplines of criminology and forensic science. This convergence led me to read a lot of foundational texts from these new disciplines and the technologies of criminal identification they deployed (photography, fingerprinting, the lie detector). Those technologies were forms of story-telling, too, about the very nature of individuals during a time of dramatic social change; and I found that early detective novels often anticipated these technologies before they were invented, expressed a wish for them, and sometimes even critiqued them as racist, sexist, and scientifically problematic. What does it mean that Sherlock Holmes himself is described by Conan Doyle as the most perfect reasoning and observing “machine” the world had ever seen, I wondered? That line of inquiry was the foundation of my second book, *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science*.

There is a good deal of material here that informs my more recent scholarly work as well: on the invention of the cinema, for example, another late nineteenth-century technology that is all about a new way of story-telling, about the line between illusion and reality and the transformation of time. Did you know that there have been more movies made of *Frankenstein*, *Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde*, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—all nineteenth-century novels about personal transformation—than any other subject? The collection also includes a number of titles on geography and the changes in how we came to experience space and time in the nineteenth-century, and the literary influences on both. There is a lot of Samuel Becket, who tested the limits of literature and language and life. There is a good deal from T.S. Eliot, to whose work I often have turned in times of challenge. And more.

“Literature is everything.” Or at least it has the capacity to appropriate everything about its time and to see beyond it, to allow us to imagine things we have never imagined, to consider the dangers and complexities in things we have taken for granted, to conceive of alternative worlds and ways of living and expressing ourselves, to tell new stories about ourselves and about what it all means: the eternal quest for a newer world. That is what I see in this X-ray of the heart of my collection. But there is always so much more to see.