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## Literature, Pleasure, and Ethics: A Historico-Critical Investigation

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper is a criticism of the theory according to which the primary aim of literature is to give pleasure, and literature does not teach anything new to human beings. The paper first attempts to place the triad literature-pleasure-ethics in a wide context of literary-critical and rhetorical debates that span centuries, from the Antiquity to the modern times. Then it proceeds to a critical examination of this doctrine of the primacy of pleasure over ethics in literature. In the end, it posits that there is no opposition between pleasure and ethics: literature only delights as it instructs. But inasmuch as ethics is the core layer, and pleasure the surface layer of literature, the former overrides the latter, and so reading involves moving from the outside to the inside of a work.

**KEYWORDS:** core layer, delighting, instruction, surface layer, teaching.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

When a statesman or a politician stands in public, all the attendance will expect him to say or tell something, to convey a *message*. The same expectation can be read in the eyes of the audience, when a preacher or a spiritual leader steps up to the pulpit. But when it is a poet who walks up the dais for a public reading, everybody will expect him/her to romanticize, to fantasize about something, and to amuse the gallery. Why is it always so? Is it because 'poetry makes nothing happen,' as W. H. Auden provocatively concluded after witnessing the Spanish Civil War? Aren't a political speech and a homily discourses in the same way as a poem is a discourse? Don't all of them have *implied messages*? Aren't the three discourses shaped by their authors' grid, or set of glasses, through which they perceive the world? Aren't they all *stories* making comments on human beings and their environment, on the way things are, the way things are likely to be, or the way things ought to be? I have these questions on my brain since the May poetry class scandal.

In fact, on May 21, 2013, I literally scandalized sophomore English students at my college during a class of African poetry analysis. What caused their indignation was the 'crime' that I committed when I was discussing the difference between subject-matter and theme in literature. To illustrate my explanation of the distinction, and relatedness, between the two notions, I took Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 and Hemingway's short-story entitled 'Hills Like White Elephants', which I believed to be quite familiar to my audience. I told them that the subject of Sonnet 116, for example, is simply 'love'. As to its theme, I said, the following is most plausible: 'Love remains constant despite tragic events and the passage of time.' Then I proceeded to the short-story of which I said again that the subject seems to be 'love' (or 'loving relationships'), and the theme goes something like this: 'Loving relationships are possible only when both partners are selflessly committed.'

I had not yet finished my argumentation when a sizable number of students put their hands up, insistently asking for the floor. The first intervener went straight to the point, and charged me with the fallacy of attributing messages, moral lessons or ideologies to literary works which, on the contrary, do not contain any whatsoever. The speaker's words were greeted with an unceasing round of warm applause from the whole group, much to my surprise. All the students joined in to support their mate's argument with loud cries of approbation, and to express their indignation at my 'new doctrine' which was in

contradiction with what they had been taught since their freshman year. Of course, they mentioned names and quoted from their lecture notes. As they reacted this way on and on, giving vent to their worry, confusion, discontentment and dissatisfaction, my surprise turned into sympathy and understanding. I realized that they had already been exposed to that 'hedonistic' theory of literature which made me uncomfortable two years back. The theory in question stipulates that

*Literature is an art that tries to make people participate to human emotions. The primary aim of literature (seen as the work of imagination or the human capacity for invention) is to give pleasure, to entertain those who voluntarily attend to it. Literature does not teach anything new to human beings, but it appeals to their emotions. It makes people laugh, weep, sympathize with characters, etc. in the same way as music, sport<sup>1</sup>, cinema... It tries to capture the emotions of human beings. For example, when you read a book or watch a movie, you get to know the characters and become a member of the world which is fictionalized. Sometimes, you sympathize with one or another character; some other times, you feel pity or you dislike one or another action (Tembue 2011: 2-3).*

I could not help attributing the 'violence' of my audience's confusion and indignation to the fact that this view of literature enjoys a very long and unchallenged tradition in the Department of English at my college. It is handed down from generation to generation, with no room for debates, as if it was accepted unanimously by critics or scholars of all times and places. Since this doctrine seems to be surrounded by walls of unquestionability, it behaves less like a theory than like a dogma imposed ex cathedra. Students are thus made to profess that in literature 'pleasure' outbalances 'teaching/instruction', or 'ethics', to such an extent that literature appears to be simply 'ethically and ideologically innocent'.

In an effort to challenge this dogmatism, the present paper attempts to place the triad literature-pleasure-ethics in a wide context of literary-critical and rhetorical debates that span centuries, from the Antiquity to the modern times. Then it proceeds to a critical examination of the doctrine of the primacy of pleasure over ethics in literature. Ultimately, it argues that there is no opposition between ethics and pleasure, and that the former outweighs the latter in literature.

## 2 LITERATURE, PLEASURE AND ETHICS: A HISTORICAL ENQUIRY

The concepts of 'pleasure' and 'instruction' are classical. Their association with literature has got a long history which can be traced back to the Antiquity. In his *Poetics*, one of the earliest seminal works of literary theory, Aristotle conceives the goal of tragedy as *catharsis*, or the liberation of the mind of its viewers. This psychological redemption results from the arousal and purification of intense fear and pity in the audience, and it is in this arousal-and-purification business that the audience derives the true tragic pleasure (2000: XIV, p.18). Furthermore, what make the audience enjoy a tragedy are the poet's perfect technique of imitation, or the 'reproduction of objects with minute fidelity', and their recognition of the model being imitated. Pleasure, not ethics or instruction, is thus central to Aristotle's theory of tragedy.

Very close to Aristotle's theory of cathartic pleasure, and yet more affective and radical than it, is Longinus's conception of 'Sublimity'. In his famous treatise *On the Sublime*, he states that "Sublimity is always an eminence and excellence in language; and that from this, and this alone, the greatest poets and writers of prose have attained the first place and have clothed their fame with immortality" (1906: I, §2, p. 2). The effect of the sublime, he adds, is not the persuasion of the audience, but their ecstasy, or their experience of an intense and ineffable feeling of delight:

*For it is not to persuasion but to ecstasy that passages of extraordinary genius carry the hearer: now the marvelous, with its power to amaze, is always and necessarily stronger than that which seeks to persuade and please: to be persuaded rests usually with ourselves, genius brings force sovereign and irresistible to bear upon every hearer, and takes its stand high above him (1906: I, §2, p. 2).*

Longinus thus affirms the supremacy of ecstasy over persuasion and pleasure. He argues that while one can control their reasoning in terms of what to admit and what to refuse, the power of ecstasy that the sublime exerts cannot be resisted. It is like a bolt of lightning which scatters everything before at a single stroke. Moreover, although he acknowledges in section seven that "the beautiful and genuine effects of sublimity... please always, and please all," Longinus just undermines

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<sup>1</sup> Let me single out sport alone here. It is a commonplace among sport fans that sport is exclusively entertainment-oriented. But some people would be unsettled, if not offended, by this view. For Albert Camus, for instance, there was no doubt that he learned all his morals on the football-ground, when he was playing as his team goalkeeper.

'pleasure'. The reason is that 'when writers try hard to please or to be exquisite, they fall into affectation' (Habib 2009: 119). Genuine sublimity<sup>2</sup> gives us far more than pleasure; it sends us into ecstasies or raptures. It "elevates us" so that "uplifted with a sense of proud possession, we are filled with joyful pride, as if we had ourselves produced the very thing we have heard."

In contrast, Horace's *Ars Poetica*, whose influence has been vast, overshadowing that of Plato and Aristotle altogether, pleads for a combination of instruction with pleasure: "Poets aim either to benefit, or to amuse, or to utter words at once both pleasing and helpful to life" (*AP*, lines 333-334). Moreover, a poet

*Has won every vote who has blended profit and pleasure, at once delighting and instructing the reader. That is the book to make money for the Sosii; this the one to cross the sea and extend to a distant day its author's fame. (AP, lines 342-346)*

Horace thus accords equal value to 'teaching and delighting' as the mission assigned to poetry. And many centuries later, other poets and critics, such as Boileau and Sir Philip Sidney, will simply reiterate the already customary notion of literature as a compromise of pleasing and instructing. Boileau will advise poets to 'join the solid with the agreeable'. As to Sidney, he merely echoes Horace when he declares that the purpose of poetry is 'to teach and delight', but he goes a few steps further where he gives preeminence to 'instruction'. In 'The Defense of Poesy' (1583), he takes the side of "poor poesy" against its detractors, and argues that poetry, whose "final end is to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls, made worse by their clayey lodgings, can be capable of," is the best vehicle for the "purifying of wit." Dryden, however, will do exactly the opposite of Sidney: he was satisfied with a poem when it simply delighted him. According to him, "delight is the chief, if not only, end of poetry: instruction can be admitted but in the second place, for poetry only delights as it instructs." (Quttous 2005: 18).

Dryden's theory strikes a subversive chord in his neoclassical era where the belief that the promotion of virtue is the sole duty of literature was a commonplace among literary critics. This changed with the advent of Romanticism. Indeed, the notion of the primacy of pleasure found its fullest expression in Romanticism, with such poets and theoreticians as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats. It is reported that in his 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth uses the word 'pleasure' (and its cognates) more than fifty times, proposing that 'the end of poetry is to produce excitement in coexistence with an overabundance of pleasure' (Bennett and Royle 2004: 258). As a matter of fact, right in the first two paragraphs where he talks about the unexpectedly successful 'pleasure-giving' career of the first volume of their poems, Wordsworth uses the word 'pleasure' three times, two of which in the same sentence; the passive 'pleased' two times; the verb 'please' one time, and their opposite 'dislike' two times – the first time as a verb, and the last as a noun. Speaking of their volume of verse, Wordsworth states:

*It was published, as an experiment, which, I hoped, might be of some use to ascertain, how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that sort of **pleasure** and that quantity of **pleasure** may be imparted, which a Poet may rationally endeavour to impart... I flattered myself that they who should be **pleased** with them would read them with more than common **pleasure**: and, on the other hand, I was well aware, that by those who should **dislike** them, they would be read with more than common **dislike**. The result has differed from my expectation in this only, that a greater number have been **pleased** than I ventured to hope I should **please**.*

Although, a few lines further, Wordsworth recognizes the importance of the 'moral relations' of poetry, he maintains that its peculiar business is to please or to 'interest mankind permanently'. 'The grand elementary principle of pleasure', as he calls it, is not, however, tied to or associated with poetry alone. It is believed to be the mover of the living world, the defining attribute of nature and life, the "impulse from the vernal wood" which teaches more of man and his moral being "than all the sages can" (Trilling 1963: 77). For Wordsworth, pleasure constitutes "the naked and dignity of man," or that by which man "knows, and feels and lives, and moves." This is one of the boldest, the most pregnant and the most shocking statements in the whole Preface: it repeats and changes St. Paul's idea that "we live, and move, and have our being" in God (Acts 17: 28).

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of the 'sublime' was later reclaimed by theorists and philosophers in the neoclassical age. Having realized that their view that the pleasurable of art lies in its satisfying harmony of design was inapplicable to the troubling, frightening events in tragic plays, Kant and other Neoclassicists postulated a radically different pleasure which is effected by the 'sublime' rather than by the 'beautiful': 'the audience thrills to see tragic heroes rise above adversity and their self-preservation instinct because it feels itself participating in and aspiring towards the potential indomitability of the human spirit' (Parkinson 2006: 176).

Let us return to 'pleasure' as the chief purpose of poetry according to Wordsworth. This is one of the points where Coleridge concedes his opinions with those that are supported in the Preface. In his *Biographia Literaria*, an ambitious essay on the nature of poetic creation and on the relationship between emotion and intellect in a theory of the imagination, Coleridge (1906: 164) defines a poem as

*that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species—(having this object in common with it)—it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the whole, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component part.*

It is obvious that Coleridge discharges poets of the business of 'teaching' or 'instructing', and affixes to them the duty of giving pleasure as their primary concern or responsibility. For him, no matter what the constituent elements, the distinctive features or the defining characteristics of a poem are, which is a controversial subject, the whole must be organized in such a way that it is 'entertaining or affecting'. Such that the reader should be carried forward on the journey of reading a poem more by 'the pleasurable activity of the mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself', than by 'the mechanical impulse of curiosity', or 'a restless desire to arrive at a final solution'. This is how Coleridge also lays great store by pleasure as the main aim of poetry.

But in comparison to Wordsworth, Coleridge and other romantics, it is Keats who has been credited with 'the boldest affirmation of the principle of pleasure' (Trilling 1963: 83). He described a poem as 'a posy/ Of luxuries, bright, milky, soft and rosy', and defined poetry itself by reference to objects of luxury, and ascribed it the function of comforting and soothing. Keats expands this 'philistine' doctrine in 'Poetry and Sleep'. The poet begins this long poem with the elevation of the gentleness, the soothingness, the tranquility, the healthfulness, the secretiveness, the serenity and the visions of sleep above those of certain elements of nature. Sleep itself is enthusiastically extolled as the 'soft closer of our eyes', the 'low murmurer of tender lullabies', the 'light hoverer around our happy pillows' and the 'silent entangler of a beauty's tresses'. Then the poet goes on to say that poetry is 'higher beyond thought' than sleep; it is 'fresher than berries of a mountain tree' as well as 'more strange, more beautiful, more smooth, more regal/ than wings of swans, than doves, than dim-seen eagle'. Further on, Keats defines his poetic mission as that of writing about all that is 'permitted and fitted for our human senses', and expresses his yearning to overwhelm himself in the pleasures of poetry for all the length of his youth. During these youthful years, the concern of his poetic art will be the representation of all the pleasures that his 'fancy sees'. These pleasures range from the simple degustation of 'sleep in the grass', of red apples and strawberries to the sophisticated enjoyment of kisses, caresses and sex with white-shouldered nymphs in shady, flowery places where tame doves will be fanning the cool gentle air over Keats' rest, dancing with ever varied ease around him, and enticing him on and on till he reaches ecstasy. In the end, this poetry will, of course, read like 'a lovely tale of human life' and like 'an eternal book' full of 'many a lovely saying/ about the leaves, and flowers – about the playing/ of nymphs in the wood, and fountains; and about the shade/ keeping a silence round a sleeping maid.'

Young Keats is so much at home with the pleasures from 'the indulgence of the appetites' and 'sensual gratification' that, when mature age closes in on him, it is only with so much reluctance that he will 'bid these joys farewell' and write a 'nobler poetry' befitting to the gravity of maturity. This new kind of poetry should mingle what is 'sweet' with what is 'strong'. But since 'strength' is inclined to deal with such ugly, distressing themes as 'the agonies and the strife of human hearts'; since it indulges in 'trees uptorn, darkness, worms, shrouds and sepulchres', and since it feeds upon 'the burrs and thorns of life', predilection should go to sweetness. The reason for this preference is that the great end of poetry is to 'be a friend/ to soothe the cares, and lift the thoughts of man.' Here again, even in its highest nobility, poetry is still associated with the function of ministering to pleasure.

The Romantic philosophy that beauty/pleasure is the touchstone of literature reached its climax at the end of the nineteenth century which saw the rise of the 'art-for-art's sake' aesthetic movement. Paradoxically, it is also towards the autumn of the nineteenth century that the close association of art, including literature, with luxury – with the pleasure or at least the comfort of the consumer, or with the quite direct flattery of his ego (Trilling 1963: 86) – started to lose ground. One of the early opponents of this ideology is Thomas Carlyle who called 'Pig-Philosophy' Bentham's moral epicurean theory that pleasure is the object of an essential and definitive part of man's nature. In his famous lectures on heroes, hero-worship and the heroic in history, Carlyle spared enough room for the treatment of the 'wondrous art of Writing' as another form of Heroism, thereby paying tribute to men-of-letters as Heroic Souls. As a Hero, the genuine man-of-letters endeavours to teach what the world will do and make (2001: 131) and to fulfil for mankind a function 'which is ever honourable, ever the highest; and was once well known to be the highest,' i.e. to 'utter forth the inspired soul of his' and to reveal to man that 'his life is a piece of the everlasting heart of Nature herself'. This is the same function for the fulfilment of which, he says, 'old

generations named a man Prophet, Priest, [or] Divinity [...]; which all [...] Heroes, by speech or by act, are sent into the world to do' (p. 132).

In agreement with Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy and conception of the writer, Carlyle solemnly declares that the mission of the Man of Letters in the world is to discern for himself the 'Divine Idea of the World,' or the Reality that lies at the bottom of all Appearance, and to make it manifest to mankind. The true writer is thus 'the light of the world; the world's Priest; - guiding it like a sacred Pillar of Fire, in its dark pilgrimage through the waste of Time' (p. 132). He cannot afford to be 'some idle nondescript, extant in the world to *amuse idleness*, and have a few coins and applauses thrown on him' (p. 131).

A self-avowed admirer of Carlyle, the leader of what he considered as the foursome<sup>3</sup> of great literary elders or athletes, R. L. Stevenson will walk in his footsteps in the trashing of the treatment of literature in a 'penny-wise<sup>4</sup> and virtue-foolish spirit' (1996: 19). While he acknowledges that the trade of writing should be 'at once agreeable, like fiddling, and useful, like good preaching' (p. 20), and he grants writers their freedom of choice between pleasing and instructing, and thereby warning them of the difficulty 'to do the one thoroughly without the other' (p. 26), Stevenson does, however, place writers before what he considers their two complementary duties, an intellectual duty and a moral duty.

The first duty incumbent upon writers is to teach the truth for the education and comfort of humanity. In the media age where, for political interests, truth is daily perverted and suppressed, and where serious subjects are daily degraded in the treatment by journalists, writers 'have to see that each man's knowledge [of good and evil] is, as near as they can make it, answerable to the facts of life' (p. 22), and have to teach the youth 'a respect for the truth'. To do this, writers should 'treat all subjects in the highest, the most honourable, and the pluckiest spirit, consistent with the fact' (p. 19). And for their treatment or narration to be consistent with the fact, their minds must be 'kept supple, charitable, bright, [and free of] prejudice' (p. 24). It is only at this cost that writers can become 'leaders of the minds of men,' shapers of 'Public Opinion or Public Feeling'.

The second duty, the moral one, is that writers have to treat their subjects in 'a good spirit' (p. 21), with impartiality; their works must be 'issued from sound, human, healthy, and potent impulses' (p. 24), or from a balanced life outlook. It is in conformity with the two duties that Stevenson advised young men or women envisaging writing as a 'business of life' to embrace literature (writing) for these two just reasons: inbred taste and usefulness to mankind, or the desire to 'do the most and the best for mankind,' 'to do considerable services' to mankind in the same way as a missionary, a patriot or a philosopher, to 'protect the oppressed and defend the truth' (p. 20).

It is quite surprising that Carlyle's (and Stevenson's) statements have not engaged literary theorists at all, and that they are scarcely ever quoted. Yet, if major political events such as revolutions and World Wars dealt the final blow to the career of pleasure in literature, the first blows seem to have been stricken by Carlyle and Dostoyevsky, his contemporary. The death of pleasure has left behind it an aesthetic culture feeding itself on what Trilling called a 'perverse and morbid idealism'<sup>5</sup> (1963: 91). This is probably what pushed Barthes to condemn modern literature as being opaque, inaccessible to the reader's enjoyment. In his opinion, the works of our modernity fail to meet the standards of writing, which is 'the science of the various blisses of languages, its Kama Sutra' (Barthes 1975: 5), and to achieve this pleasure-giving duplicity (the subversive edge and the conservative edge) of which Sade proved such an unparalleled master. It is worth taking note of the fact that Barthes went even further than Keats in his assertion of pleasure. He likened the pleasure of the text to 'that untenable, impossible, purely novelistic instant so relished by Sade's libertine when he manages to be hanged and then to cut his rope at the very moment of his orgasm, his bliss' (p. 6). This exuberant eroticism is absolutely repellent to the modern mind. It is an unaffordable and unwelcome luxury in these hard times marked by fierce political and economic debates, climate-change-related worries, bio-chemical weapon disasters and menacing nuclear warheads. And, as Eagleton (1996:72) rightly pointed it

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<sup>3</sup> In his essay 'The Morality of the Profession of Letters,' Stevenson salutes Carlyle, Ruskin, Browning and Tennyson as 'the four great elders who are still spared to our respect and admiration' (1996: 23).

<sup>4</sup> Schopenhauer also considers the fact of writing for money as the ruin of literature. According to him, no one writes anything that is worth reading, unless s/he writes for the sake of his/her subject, i.e. unless s/he has thoughts or experiences which are worth communicating (2005: 10-11).

<sup>5</sup> Since art is the mirror of society, it is more accurate to view the search for a grisly gratification in unpleasure by modern literary characters, like Dostoyevsky's *Underground Man*, as a reflection of the overall cultural antagonism to the principle of pleasure. In our scientific and technocratic age, for instance, one of the major reasons why the number of literature and humanities students is systematically sagging every year is that these disciplines are believed to produce 'soft' knowledge and to offer 'private understanding, pleasure, and consolation' (Ireland 2013a).

out, there is something really disturbing about Barthes' self-indulgent avant-garde hedonism in a world where others lack not only books but food.

It is obvious that artists have kept 'pleasure for pleasure' at bay since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. As a matter of fact, the priority of modernist literature was not pleasure. It was not ethics either. Alienated from what they considered as the commonplace and often boring irrelevancies of daily life, modernist writers were interested more in the inner workings of consciousness than in the subtleties of conscience. Their preference for formal experimentation to accurate representation did not leave them with room for engagement with ethical issues, nor did it make it easy for the reader to 'connect any moral matters that might arise in a work with his or her own experience of the world' (Day 2006: 74). Postmodernist literature, however, was ethical and political. The postmodernists 'reveled in the visceral contemporaneity of the everyday, moulding out of the maelstrom of mass culture an aesthetics of ephemerality,' and they emphasized the 'inherently political qualities of art' (Lea 2006: 186). Sartre, for instance, eloquently defended engaged literature<sup>6</sup> and art, and Primo Levi invited the writer to transcend his/her individual loneliness and despair in order to fulfil his/her ethical duty, which is to communicate clearly with others (Boldrini 2011: 189). As for postcolonial writers whose chief preoccupation was to write back to the center, to rewrite the canon, to right history as written by imperialists, and to help their societies 'regain belief in [themselves] and sweep away the complexes of years of denigration and self-abasement' (Achebe 1975: 44), pure, innocent art was but too cheap, or too expensive. Achebe tasked the writer, especially the African writer, with 'teaching' or 'educating' their people.

### 3 FROM PLEASURE TO ETHICS: A JOURNEY TO THE HEART OF THE MATTER

When we are told that the primary goal of literature is to give pleasure, the surprises and questions that strike us are more about 'literature' than about 'pleasure'. We almost naturally shy away from 'pleasure' for two main reasons. The first reason is that it is extremely difficult, or even impossible, for us to talk about pleasure, enjoyment, emotional and indeed erotic excitement. And the second reason, which is related to the first, is that such pleasures tend to border on the transgressive or taboo (Bennett and Royle 2003: 258). As we focus on 'literature', we are surprised, and even shocked, to see that this single statement blurs at once the never-trespassed canonical line, if not the insurmountable wall, between 'literature' and 'engaging fiction'. We consented long ago that 'literature' is the set of 'scholarly texts' designed for education, the hard stuff which we should teach to students, and which should be the object of academic research and writing. As to 'engaging fiction,' it is understood as those 'popular texts' written for entertainment, the soft stuff which we read for pleasure, and which are excluded from school/college/university syllabi. And we are used to the comfort of this tacit agreement. But then there are texts that come to unsettle this categorization and to discomfort us. Let us take up, for example, *The Da Vinci Code*: why did this novel, which canonists would not hesitate to cast into the category of 'engaging fiction,' suddenly give rise to more than a dozen books<sup>7</sup> thwarting its theses? This atypical bestseller, indeed a literary phenomenon of our time, is as narratively enjoyable as it is culturally and religiously disturbing. If it was 'innocent,' i.e. meant for pleasure only, this book wouldn't engage Bible scholars, theologians, Christianity specialists, historians, art historians and experts, and the media in stormy controversies.

Dan Brown's novel disproves the binary opposition (texts for education versus texts for pleasure) by appropriating the two functions (entertaining and educating), and it reclaims this wholeness for all works of creative imagination, both 'literature' and 'engaging fiction' alike. As far as creative writing is concerned, there is nothing like writing to please only, or like writing to instruct only. All literary/creative texts have two layers: the outer layer or surface (pleasure) and the inner layer or core (ethics). The process of reading a text entails, therefore, moving from its surface to its core: sticking only to the surface results in self-indulgence, indifference or neglectfulness. If we find, for example, Frederick Forsyth's *The Odessa File* enjoyable, instead of feeling indignant at the indescribable suffering of the Jews, we obstinately refuse to be affected by the

<sup>6</sup> For Sartre, to write is 'both to disclose the world and to offer it as a task to the generosity of the reader [...]; but [...] as the real world is revealed only by action, as one can feel himself in it only by exceeding it in order to change it, the novelist's universe would lack thickness if it were not discovered in a movement to transcend it' (1949: 60-61).

<sup>7</sup> I can mention only some of them here : Darrell Bock's *Breaking the Vinci Code* (2004); James L. Garlow and Peter Jones' *Cracking Da Vinci's Code* (2004); James L. Garlow's *The Da Vinci Codebreaker* (2006); Amy Welborn's *De-coding Da Vinci: The Facts Behind the Fiction of the Bestselling Novel and Hit Movie* (2004); Richard Abanes' *The Truth Behind the Da Vinci Code* (2004); Simon Cox's *Cracking The Da Vinci Code* (2004); Erwin Lutzer's *The Da Vinci Deception* (2004); Steve Kellmeyer's *Fact and Fiction in the Da Vinci Code* (2004); Carl Olson and Sandra Miesel's *The Da Vinci Hoax* (2004), and Mark Oxbrow and Ian Robertson's *Roslyn and the Grail* (2006).

cruelty with which powerful people can treat weak, defenseless ones in society. And there's the rub when pleasure is ascribed to literature as its chief goal.

The statement about the primacy of pleasure in literature is also shocking inasmuch as it reduces writers to mere entertainers. If writers are joyful entertainers, society can be only too proud of them, only too happy to have many of them. Yet this does not check out against the fate of a significant number of writers. For instance, Diderot's 1749 *Lettre sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient* won him three months in the dungeons of the Vincennes fortress. The spiritual leader of Iran Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued on February 14, 1989 a fatwa requiring Salman Rushdie's death because of his allegedly apostate novel *The Satanic Verses*. This was not just an ineffectual death sentence, for at least two attempts to take the life of the renegade Rushdie have already failed. The Egyptian writer and Nobel Prize Winner Naguib Mahfouz, who defended Rushdie but criticized his novel as 'insulting' to Islam, was also sentenced to death by Islamic fundamentalists for his novel *Children of Gebelawi*. In 1994, he survived an assassination attempt, but his right hand nerves were damaged, thereby affecting his writing rhythm. The late Chinua Achebe fled from the military personnel who, on the ground of the dénouement of his prophetic novel *A Man of the People*, suspected him of having foreknowledge of the 1966 failed coup in Nigeria. Achebe was not caught, but his wife suffered a miscarriage at the end of their flight journey. Kenya's most famous writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o was arrested and jailed without a trial for his 1977 play *I Will Marry When I Want*. And the renowned Malawian poet Jack Mapanja drank from the same cup: he was detained without trial for three years, seven months and sixteen days for his first book of poetry *Of Chameleons and Gods*. Now we should pause for a moment and consider these questions: If writers are entertainers or pleasure-providers, why have they been persecuted all over the world? Were the aforementioned writers visited with violence because they had ended up giving too much pleasure for society to accommodate? Or did all this happen quite by accident? If I should drop a hint for respondents or warn them, I will point out that answers to these questions do not exist on the side of pleasure.

But partakers in the 'murder of the author' and partisans of 'intentional fallacy' will sure object to these questions, discarding them as absurd for the simple reason that literature has nothing to see with the writer. Hence, in the statement 'the primary aim of literature is to give pleasure,' literature will amount to nothing more than the 'text' and/or the 'reader'. Their line of contention is likely to be something of this sort: We do not 'read' the writer, but the 'text' and 'ourselves' (Harold Bloom). Now, this is a simplistic, self-deceiving way of forgetting, ignoring or obliterating altogether the fact that 'writing' precedes 'reading,' the fact that there would be no 'reading' if there was no 'writing'. Any reading material exists between people (the writer and the reader), for it is only people who can *mean* anything (Danby 1960: 15). That is why the writer definitely has to be part of the equation or of the chart of communication: in our thinking and theorizing about literature the writer should not be left out. In fact, we even ought to begin with the writer.

The writer is a sine qua non for a balanced consideration of the connection between writing and giving pleasure. S/he takes the first step in the process of communication. When we represent our statement 'the primary aim of literature is to give pleasure' in the traditional chart of communication, the writer appears as the Sender (S), pleasure as the Message (M) and the reader as the Receiver (R). And the statement itself appears to be saying that the primordial intention (intended message/meaning) of the writer is to please the reader<sup>8</sup>. But knowing that pleasure is a matter of personal taste, knowing how it is difficult, challenging, almost impossible to assign any real, objective meaning to the concept of 'pleasure,' binding the writer to the 'duty of giving pleasure'<sup>9</sup> to his/her readership amounts to putting the hurdle too high for him/her. The impossible that is implicitly expected from the writer is that s/he should have more than an average knowledge of the psychology and preferences of his/her target readership. What makes the task infinitely more complicated is the fact that no readership is homogenous: each reader has got his/her own conception and experience of readerly pleasure. Reader B may

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<sup>8</sup> A writer, especially a novice, can claim to be an *élément bouclé*, i.e. to write for his/her own pleasure. This is the case with Theodore, the Page to Don Raymond, Marquis de Las Cisternas in Matthew Gregory Lewis' gothic novel *The Monk*. After the Marquis had singled out a terrible confusion of metaphors, amateurish rhyming and unconscious plagiarism as the major flaws of his poem 'Love and Age,' Theodore replied: 'All this is true, Seigneur; But you should consider that I only write for [my] pleasure.' But, as Sartre rightly observes, 'it is not that one writes for himself. That would be the worst blow [...]. The operation of writing implies that of reading as its dialectical correlative and these two acts connected necessitate the two distinct agents. It is the conjoint effort of author and reader which brings upon the scene that concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind. There is no art except for and by others' (1949: 41-42).

<sup>9</sup> Barthes states that, since there is no guarantee that writing in pleasure will induce reading with pleasure, the writer 'must seek out [the] reader (must 'cruise' him) without knowing where he is' so that a site of bliss may be created between them (1975: 4). Notice that he immodestly demands the writer to gratify not just any 'innocent' pleasure, but this utmost pleasure, this very unspeakable pleasure: sexual pleasure.



not necessarily derive pleasure where Reader A does or did. In case this should happen, it is unlikely that both readers will 'feel' pleasure and account for it in the same way. Now, the writer can please his/her readership as a complex whole only if he can please every member of it as an individual. For this, s/he is required to know and skillfully appeal to the conception and experience of pleasure of each individual reader. This is an unachievable feat for a human being. Well, not even God pleases every individual in the world!

As much as it sets an unattainable goal for the writer, the theory about the primacy of pleasure also leads the critic into an impasse. If the vocation of literature is to give pleasure to the reader, the mission of the critic is, therefore, to account for the pleurability of literary works. In fact, Barthes declares that he uses pleasure as the yardstick for the judgment of creative texts. For him, a good text is that which proves to him that *it desires him*; that which pledges to grant him continuous jubilation, and that which, by its perversion, chokes him with pleasure. Pilfering from a much-quoted Nietzschean phrase and going at it hammer and tongs, Barthes affirms that 'brio of the text (without which, after all, there is no text) is its *will to bliss*' (1975: 13). When a text bores him, he rules it out as having been written quite apart from bliss. But when he takes pleasure in reading a story, a sentence, or a word, he immediately decides that they were written in pleasure<sup>10</sup>. Such pleasure, he says, does not contradict the writer's complaint (1975: 4). This means that if you luxuriate in the graceful and vivid prose and in the hard-to-put-down story of *This Side of Paradise*, you should interpret as an ironical expression of authorial pleasure Fitzgerald's own moving confession that he wrote this novel 'in a haze of anxiety and unhappiness [...], haunted always by my shabby suits, my poverty, and love'. Now, if you as a critic try to grasp Barthes' theoretical concepts and apply them to the appraisal of a literary work, you will soon be at a loss. These concepts are so much loaded with personal feelings and emotions that they are intellectually incommunicable to anybody else.

The trouble with this pleasure-oriented reception theory is threefold: first, its cult of excessive self-indulgence results in an unethical act of 'bracketing' the writer's subjectivity, as in the abovementioned example. Yet, this subjectivity cannot be avoided with impunity in literary studies and criticism. Second, in a burst of sentimentalism, it ties and reduces in an astonishingly and a flippantly gratuitous way the author's writing mood, his/her plan and the design of the text itself to readerly gratification. Third, the result of its appreciating literary works according to pleasure is inescapably an empty pluralism, an eccentric relativism or a fanatical anarchism in criticism. If we should account for the success or failure of literary works in giving pleasure, can there be any common ground between us? And what standards can we apply in such a perilous enterprise: literary consumption or the marketability of a literary work? Doubtless, a novel like *The Da Vinci Code* cannot sell out millions of copies if it does not 'please' readers. But since it pleases them this much, does it imply that this was the author's aim in writing the novel? It is a fact that, after publication, a literary work usually embarks on its own career independently or regardless of the author's initial design. Moreover, to set the volume of sales as the standard for the success or failure of a book is to 'assassinate' literature, and to 'enslave' literary criticism to popular mode or to public taste: some books that are considered as 'great' by critics are sometimes commercial failures, and those that perform brilliantly on the market may not glean considerable critical acclaim. If we had had to commit this literary crime for the sake of facility or 'convenience' in criticism, still we would not have recorded any progress in establishing intelligible and unbiased norms for the judgement of literary pleasure.

Some people might, by this level in their reading, have had the feeling that I am going to the farthest length to ban pleasure from literature, or to downplay its role in reading. But let it be just a fleeting impression, because the deep truth is that I do not admit any impediment to the relationship between pleasure and ethics. I agree with Dryden that literature only delights as it instructs. But since 'a literary work is a piece of discourse which is semantically dense, i.e. having important implicit meanings or connotations' (Breadsley in Ngwaba 2011: 20), I admit pleasure in the second place. Pleasure has a fundamental importance only when it comes to reading. It is fundamentally important in the sense that it makes a piece of literature readable and publishable: the author cannot choose to write what will not be read, because unreadable or unenjoyable literature is likely not to be published. If writers create appealing characters, use powerful and beautiful language, pour a little bit of comedy and pathos in the plot, introduce some kind of cinematographic suspense in it, or spin gripping tales, it is because they want to hook readers, to scare the hell of boredom off their minds. That is how we are able to enjoy sad, tragic stories like those of Hamlet, Werther and Okonkwo. The German writer Johann Paul Richter treats this

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<sup>10</sup> However, the slightest suspicion that a literary text was written in pleasure is enough to make Sartre uncomfortable. 'If I were to suspect,' he writes, 'the artist of having written out of passion and in passion, my confidence would immediately vanish' (1949: 55). Sartre even prefers the expression 'aesthetic joy' to 'pleasure,' and his conception of this 'joy' is altogether different from Barthes' understanding of the 'pleasure of the text'.

sort of enjoyment as the 'forgivable sin' of literature. This sin is forgivable only when the reader is generous enough as not to stop and stay in it, only when s/he moves to seek the truth.

Those who are still dismissing literature as 'fiction with no bearing on the truth' can learn something edifying from the innovative teaching strategy of Joseph L. Badaracco, the John Shad Professor of Business Ethics at Harvard Business School (HBS). Badaracco, who is walking in the footsteps of Robert Cole, Harvard University's James Agee Professor of Social Ethics, strongly believes in the effectiveness of using literature to train and develop MBA students' leadership and entrepreneurial skills, and he shared his experience and made his case in a book entitled *Questions of Character: Illuminating the Heart of Leadership Through Literature*. He prefers literature to case studies and business books on leadership because

*Literature gives students a much more realistic view of what's involved in leading. Literature lets you see leaders and others from the inside. You share the sense of what they're thinking and feeling. In real life, you're usually at some distance and things are prepared, polished. With literature, you can see the whole messy collection of things that happen inside our heads [...]. Literature helps identify the really complicated issues, and the stakes on all sides (Leddy 2013).*

By engaging his students in the discussion of literary characters' problems, Badaracco prepares them to grapple with ethical issues in their business career. The treatment of these characters of real people stimulates from students a much deeper engagement in the actual material, not in the gymnastics about debits and credits, but in the dialectics of ethical choices and actions in business. In these class debates, students make 'comments about who they are and what they care about, and how they feel about the world that differs from their fellow students. [This comment-making] also reflects the student's own character and judgment' (Leddy 2013). Because of the power of the literature on their reading list and used in Badaracco's class, students have described his course as unusual, the most valuable and memorable. Curiously, on this list, works of fiction like Allan Gurganus' short-story 'Blessed Assurance', Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* and Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons*, and classic works of moral philosophy by great thinkers like Aristotle and Kant far outnumber business books.

Professor Badaracco's practice is an irrefutable proof that literature is 'good for training citizens who need to understand our complex world before plunging into action' (Dana Sorensen), and 'valuable in civic discourse' (Ireland 2003b) about current exigent issues such as the global economic crisis, climate change and the like. There is truth in fiction: the way to its discovery passes through pleasure and goes beyond it.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

I would like to wind up my historico-critical investigation into the relationship between literature, pleasure and ethics by borrowing a metaphor from Lucretius. In the fourth part of *On the Nature of Things*, the devoted disciple of Epicurus compares 'committed' poets like himself to healers. Knowing that children dislike the "drink of bitter gall" (lines 21-22), healers usually spread the "sweet golden liquid honey" (IV, line 18) round the cup to deceive an unsuspecting young child into swallowing down the "foul-tasting wormwood" (line 17). Far from hurting the naïve child, this deception rather restores him to good health, and helps him grow stronger. In the same way, aware that their "reasoning/ seems generally too bitter for those men/ who have not tried it and the common crowd/ shrinks back in fear" (lines 25-28), poets sprinkle their verses "with poetry's sweet honey" (line 31) to seduce the reader's attention on the verses "until you can see the nature of things/ and recognize how useful that can be" (lines 34-36). In this theory, which I espouse, every pleasing, pleasurable or attractive aspect of a literary work is just an enticement, a lure or bait; the mission or vocation of literature is heroically didactic and ethical. For there can be no innocent art!

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